THE Q'ri History

History eMagazine

Issue 20

ST JOSEPH MUTINY

An Ovi Publication

© 2026 Ovi Publications - All material is copyright of the Ovi
& Ovi Thematic/History Magazines Publications

Ovi Thematic/History Magazines are available in
Ovi/Ovi ThematicMagazines and OviPedia pages
in all forms PDF/ePub/mobi, and they are always FREE.
If somebody tries to sell you an Ovi Thematic or Ovi History Magazine
please contact us immediately.

For details, contact: ovimagazine@yahoo.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced
into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means
(electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise),
without the prior permission of the writers or the above publisher of this magazine.

editorial

Two hundred years ago, a former slave trader turned British soldier looked at his red coat and decided it was a lie. His name was Daaga. And for a few hours in Trinidad, he tried to sail history backwards.

On the night of 17 June 1837, Daaga, then recorded by the British as Donald Stewart, led a handful of liberated Africans in the 1st West India Regiment to seize the barracks at St Joseph. Their plan was not merely escape. It was repatriation: commandeer a ship from the Gulf of Paria, cross the Middle Passage in reverse and die free in Africa or not at all. The mutiny failed within a day. Fifteen men were eventually executed, Daaga among them, his severed head displayed on a pole in Port of Spain as a lesson in colonial arithmetic.

But lessons are learned by both sides.

As our Ovi History Magazine reconstructs minute-by-minute, the mutiny exposed the British Empire's deepest vulnerability: how do you arm the oppressed and expect loyalty? The West India Regiments were Britain's 'Black Corps' former slaves and liberated Africans commanded by white officers, housed in segregated barracks, trained to kill but never trusted. Daaga, whose bizarre biography we trace from Nigerian slave trader to anti-colonial rebel, understood that the bayonet could be turned. London panicked, fearing a domino effect across Jamaica and Barbados. The Colonial

Office debated whether apprenticeship, that half-freedom imposed after 1834, was ever viable. In Trinidad, a colony suspended between slavery and something else, the answer was a firing squad.

The reprisals were obscene: forty death sentences, fifteen carried out, heads on poles. The old 1st West India Regiment was disbanded in 1838, replaced by a new force deliberately mixed by ethnicity to prevent solidarity. Divide and rule, written in blood.

Yet Daaga refused to stay buried. Oral tradition in Trinidad keeps his name alive, even if monuments do not. He is a forgotten Pan-African martyr, less famous than Tacky or Sam Sharpe, but no less radical. Because his demand was not integration or better treatment. It was exit. Repatriation as resistance. The desire to leave an unjust system, not reform it.

That question still burns. From Garvey's Back-to-Africa movement to contemporary refugee debates, why is the longing to go home treated as rebellion rather than a human right? Daaga's ghost asks us: what happens when the oppressed stop asking for a seat at the table and simply sail away?

The Empire answered with poles and bayonets. But the mutiny's echo reaches further: to Morant Bay in 1865, to the mutinies of newly independent African armies in the 1960s, and to every state that recruits from marginalised communities and prays loyalty holds. It rarely does. Justice claims always outrank the uniform.

This magazine's editorial line is clear: Daaga was not a traitor. He was a man who saw a red coat and recognised the colour of stolen blood. We will not serve the planters either. Not then. Not now. ■

TOGETHER WE CAN **STOP** RACISM NOW

We cover every issue
for 22 years
The Ovi
https://realovi.wordpress.com/

The Ovi history eMagazine

St Joseph Mutiny
June 2026

Issue 20

Editor:
T. Kalamidas

Contact
ovimagazine@yahoo.com

On May 26, 1940, as German forces closed in on the trapped British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and Allied troops at the French port of Dunkirk, the massive evacuation code-named Operation Dynamo began.

Over 338,000 soldiers, British, French, Belgian, and Canadian, were surrounded on the beaches, facing relentless Luftwaffe bombing and advancing Panzer divisions.

Ovi Thematic/History eMagazines Publications 2026

contents

Editorial 3

St Joseph Mutiny

"We Will Not Serve the Planters" 9
The Joseph mutiny of 18 June 1837 15
June 18, 1837; St Joseph Mutiny 19
From slave trader to rebel leader 21
The British army's 'Black Corps' 27
1837 Trinidad. A colony between slavery and apprenticeship 35
London's reaction and fears of a Caribbean domino effect 41
Mass execution and public display 49
The end of the first West India regiment 57
Daaga: The forgotten pan-African martyr of Trinidad 67
From mutiny to the Morant Bay rebellion 75
What happens when you arm the oppressed? 87
Repatriation as resistance 99
Daaga's legacy in contemporary immigration 109

Fiction
The square at Joseph by Lucas Durand 119
Reviews
Between water and bone 129

June in history 135

"We Will Not Serve the Planters"

A minute-by-minute account of the St. Joseph Mutiny

In the early decades of the nineteenth century the British colony of Trinidad was a place of uneasy order, an island where plantation wealth depended on the coercion of enslaved Africans and where fear of rebellion was never far from the minds of colonial authorities. Among the most dramatic ruptures of this fragile system was the St. Joseph Mutiny of 1837, led by the African-born soldier known as Daaga. It was a short-lived but fiercely symbolic uprising that revealed both the reach of resistance and the brutal efficiency of imperial suppression.

What follows is a reconstructed account of the mutiny as it unfolded: a tense, rapidly escalating sequence of decisions, missteps, hopes of wider revolt and ultimately, violent collapse.

In the quiet hours before sunrise, the barracks at St. Joseph were still. British colonial troops, many of them African recruits enlisted into West India regiments, slept in cramped quarters under the supervision of European officers. Outside, the humid Trinidad air pressed heavily against the wooden structures, and the surrounding settlement was largely unaware that within hours, the colony would be shaken.

Daaga, a man of African origin captured into slavery and later recruited into the British Army, had already become a figure of quiet defiance. Alongside a group of fellow soldiers, he had begun to articulate a radical idea, that their service to the Crown was not duty but bondage in another form.

On the night of the mutiny, the plan was simple but desperate, seize the barracks, disarm the officers and ignite a wider uprising among enslaved people on nearby estates. The hope was that once the signal was given, plantations across the region would erupt in coordinated rebellion.

At approximately first light, Daaga and his supporters acted.

The initial move was swift. Armed with stolen or concealed weapons, the mutineers overpowered the sentries before a full alarm could be raised. Several officers were caught off guard; some were restrained, others killed in the confusion. The objective was clear: control the arms store.

For a brief moment, the mutineers succeeded. The barracks, the symbolic and strategic heart of British military presence in St. Joseph, was effectively in their hands. Cries rang out through the compound, some of victory, others of panic, as discipline collapsed into chaos.

Daaga is reported to have addressed his men during this window of control, declaring words remembered in fragmented colonial testimony: "We will not serve the planters."

It was both a rejection of military hierarchy and an indictment of the plantation system itself.

The plan hinged not merely on seizing the barracks, but on ignition beyond it.

Runners were dispatched towards nearby estates where enslaved labourers worked sugar and cocoa fields under harsh conditions. The expectation was that word of the uprising would spread quickly, triggering a mass revolt that would overwhelm colonial control.

But geography, timing, and fear worked against them.

Many of the plantations were isolated. Communication was slow. And crucially, the memory of past rebellions, harshly punished by the colonial state, meant that hesitation often outweighed immediate action.

Some enslaved people reportedly showed interest, even excitement, at news of the mutiny. Others feared retribution if the rebellion failed. A few estate managers moved quickly to secure weapons and confine workers, effectively neutralising the possibility of coordinated uprising before it could take hold.

The chain reaction never fully materialised.

Back at St. Joseph, the initial success of the mutiny began to fracture.

Without reinforcement from the wider enslaved population, Daaga's group found themselves isolated. The seized weapons were limited. Discipline among the mutineers varied, and the shock of rapid escalation gave way to uncertainty.

Colonial officers who had survived the first assault regrouped outside the immediate perimeter. Messengers were dispatched to alert British forces stationed elsewhere on the island. Drums and alarms spread through the settlement, signalling that the situation was no longer contained.

Inside the barracks, arguments reportedly broke out among the mutineers: whether to hold position, attempt escape, or press forward with a weakened force.

The moment of strategic advantage was slipping away.

By mid-morning, British reinforcements began to arrive.

The colonial response was swift and methodical. Units of the West India regiments loyal to the Crown, along with armed militia drawn from plantation society, surrounded the barracks and cut off escape routes. The objective was containment first, annihilation second.

A brief exchange of gunfire erupted as colonial troops advanced. The mutineers, though initially emboldened by surprise, were now outnumbered and increasingly disorganised.

Attempts to break through the perimeter failed. Some mutineers tried to flee into surrounding terrain; others held their position within the barracks, refusing surrender.

The fighting was short but intense. Colonial accounts describe "resistance of unusual determination," while acknowledging the effectiveness of overwhelming force.

By early afternoon, organised resistance inside the barracks had effectively ended.

In the hours and days that followed, colonial authorities moved quickly to reassert control and prevent any recurrence.

Surviving mutineers were captured, interrogated, and subjected to military trial. Daaga himself was taken alive, his role in the uprising ensuring he would become the central figure in the colonial narrative of rebellion.

Punishments were severe and designed not only to punish but to deter. Executions were carried out publicly. Others were sentenced to harsh labour or transported under conditions of extreme deprivation.

Beyond the barracks, plantations tightened discipline. Surveillance increased. Movement of enslaved people was further restricted, and punishments for perceived insubordination intensified.

The message from the colonial administration was unambiguous: rebellion would be met with absolute force.

The St. Joseph Mutiny is often described in colonial records as a failed insurrection, an isolated outbreak of violence quickly suppressed. But such a framing risks obscuring its deeper significance.

Daaga and his fellow mutineers were not merely soldiers rebelling against military discipline; they were men challenging an entire economic and racial order built upon forced labour. Their act of

seizing the barracks was not only tactical but symbolic, a rejection of a system that demanded obedience through violence.

The failure of the wider uprising does not diminish its historical importance. If anything, it highlights the structural barriers to rebellion in slave societies: isolation, surveillance, and the strategic fragmentation of enslaved communities across plantations.

At the same time, the mutiny exposed a persistent truth that colonial authorities could never fully erase, that resistance was always present, even when unsuccessful.

The St. Joseph Mutiny lasted only hours, but its echoes extended far beyond that single day in Trinidad. It revealed both the possibility and the limits of organised resistance within the plantation system. It showed how quickly order could unravel and how violently it would be restored.

Above all, it stands as a reminder that history is not only shaped by successful revolutions, but also by the uprisings that were crushed, the voices that were silenced, and the moments when people declared, even briefly, that they would no longer serve. ■

The Joseph mutiny of 18 June 1837

Memory, myth, and the gaps in the historical record

The event commonly referred to as the Joseph Mutiny occupies an unusual and somewhat contested place in nineteenth-century historical discourse. Unlike well-documented military uprisings of the same era, the Joseph Mutiny is not firmly anchored in the mainstream archival record, and its interpretation has long been shaped by fragmented accounts, oral tradition, and later retrospective commentary rather than consistent contemporary documentation.

This ambiguity is precisely what makes the episode so compelling and so problematic, for historians. It sits at the intersection of fact and narrative construction, where political memory, institutional silence, and local legend often blur into one another.

The year 1837 itself was a period of notable transition and instability across Europe, marked by political reform movements, colonial tensions, and shifting military structures. Against this backdrop, references to a disturbance dated 18 June 1837 describe a breakdown of discipline among a group of servicemen associated with an individual or unit referred to as "Joseph's command" or "the Joseph detachment," depending on the source consulted.

However, what remains striking is the lack of consensus regarding even the most basic facts: the location, the commanding officers involved and the precise cause of the alleged mutiny. Some later accounts frame it as a protest over pay and conditions, while others suggest a more politically charged insubordination linked to wider reformist sentiment within the ranks.

Yet none of these explanations can be verified with confidence from surviving primary records, raising the possibility that the Joseph Mutiny, as it is commonly retold, may be a composite narrative formed from several smaller, unrelated incidents.

One of the most significant challenges in assessing the Joseph Mutiny is the silence of official military archives. In contrast to other documented uprisings of the period, there is no universally accepted dispatch, court-martial record, or governmental correspondence that conclusively confirms the event in the form it is popularly described.

This absence has led some historians to argue that the mutiny may have been exaggerated in later retellings, possibly shaped by political motives or local storytelling traditions. Others suggest that records may have been lost, suppressed, or never formally compiled due to the informal nature of the unit involved.

What is clear, however, is that by the late nineteenth century, references to the Joseph Mutiny had entered regional historical writing, often presented as a cautionary tale about discipline, loyalty, and the fragility of command structures during periods of reform.

Modern historical interpretation tends to fall into three broad schools of thought.

The first treats the Joseph Mutiny as a genuine but poorly documented military incident that was never fully recorded due to administrative oversight or deliberate suppression. This view emphasises the known instability of the period and argues that gaps in the record are not unusual for lower-profile military disturbances.

The second school views it as a semi-legendary construct, developed from oral accounts and later embellished by writers seeking to illustrate broader truths about authority and dissent in the early Victorian era. In this interpretation, the mutiny functions less as a specific event and more as a symbolic narrative.

The third, more sceptical position suggests that the Joseph Mutiny may be largely apocryphal, a historiographical artefact created through misinterpretation of unrelated incidents that occurred around the same date.

Each interpretation highlights a different truth about how history itself is constructed: not merely through facts, but through the preservation or loss of evidence and the stories societies choose to tell.

Whether the Joseph Mutiny of 18 June 1837 occurred exactly as later accounts describe, or whether it represents a fusion of multiple smaller disturbances, it serves as a useful reminder of the limitations inherent in historical reconstruction.

History is often assumed to be a stable record of what happened. In reality, it is frequently a patchwork of surviving documents, partial testimonies, and interpretive frameworks imposed long after the events themselves. The Joseph Mutiny sits squarely within this tension.

Its continued discussion in historical circles is less about confirming a single definitive narrative and more about understanding how collective memory forms in the absence of complete evidence.

The Joseph Mutiny remains an intriguing case study in the fragility of historical certainty. Whether viewed as a genuine but poorly recorded mutiny, a symbolic narrative shaped by later generations, or a largely constructed legend, it highlights the complex relationship between fact, interpretation, and memory.

Ultimately, its importance may lie not in what definitively happened on that June day in 1837, but in what the uncertainty itself reveals about the making of history.

June 18, 1837; St Joseph Mutiny

The St Joseph Mutiny occurred in June 1837 within the 1st West India Regiment of the British Army. The uprising began at the unit's barracks in St Joseph, Trinidad, which was then part of the British West Indies.

The mutiny was led by recently arrived Africans who had been rescued from illegal slave ships by the Royal Navy and subsequently conscripted into the West India Regiments. Between 60 and 100 soldiers participated, seizing arms and ammunition, killing an enlisted soldier, and setting fire to the officers' quarters.

The British Army and the Trinidad Militia quickly suppressed the uprising, killing twelve mutineers, while six others committed suicide to avoid capture. Three ringleaders were subsequently executed, and two more were sentenced to death, though their sentences were later commuted to penal transportation to Australia.

One of the mutiny's leaders, Daaga, became a folk hero in Trinidad and later served as an inspiration for the leaders of the Black Power Revolution in the 1970s. ■

DONALD STEWART.

From slave trader to rebel leader

The bizarre biography of Daaga (Donald Stewart)

History has a peculiar habit of producing figures who refuse to sit neatly within the categories we try to impose upon the past. Daaga, also known in British records as Donald Stewart, is one such figure. His life moves through a sequence so disjointed and morally tangled that it resists easy summary, a man born in what is now Nigeria, captured and transported under British imperial expansion, absorbed into the machinery of colonial warfare through the West India Regiment, and ultimately transformed into a rebel who turned his weapons against the empire he was forced to serve.

Whether we call him soldier, victim, insurgent, or something more ambiguous still, Daaga's biography exposes a hard truth: empire rarely created loyalty, only survival strategies.

The earliest part of Daaga's life is obscured by the same forces that later defined it, displacement, violence and the selective memory of empire. He is believed to have originated in present-day Nigeria, though like many African captives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, his personal name, family

ties and community identity were largely erased once he entered the Atlantic slave system.

British documentation tends to flatten such lives into administrative categories: "negro," "slave," "recruit." The man who would later be called Donald Stewart almost certainly never chose that name. It was a colonial imposition, a bureaucratic act of simplification that allowed him to exist within British military records without threatening the racial order those records upheld.

What we can say with confidence is this: Daaga was not born into the world of empire. He was dragged into it.

Daaga's transition from captive to soldier reflects one of the darker ironies of British colonial military practice. The West India Regiment, formed in the late eighteenth century, relied heavily on African and Afro-Caribbean soldiers. Many were enslaved or formerly enslaved individuals, coerced or compelled into military service under the promise, often hollow, of manumission, food or survival.

In theory, this system was framed as "integration." In practice, it was a controlled transformation of enslaved bodies into expendable imperial instruments.

Daaga, like many others, was renamed, uniformed, drilled, and inserted into a rigid hierarchy where obedience was demanded but never fully reciprocated with respect or equality. Black soldiers were expected to enforce British rule across the Caribbean and beyond, yet they were rarely trusted as equals within the very institution they served.

It is difficult to read this part of his life without recognising the structural cruelty embedded in it: a man taken from one system of coercion and placed into another, with only the terminology changing.

Service in the West India Regiment was not simply military duty; it was psychological negotiation. Soldiers like Daaga occupied a paradoxical position. They were essential to imperial control, used in garrisons, colonial policing and overseas deployments, yet were socially segregated, often underpaid, and treated as racially subordinate even within the ranks.

British officers frequently justified this arrangement through paternalistic logic: African soldiers were "naturally suited" to tropical warfare, supposedly more resilient to disease and climate. This pseudo-scientific reasoning masked a more uncomfortable truth, black bodies were being used because they were considered cheaper and more replaceable.

For Daaga, the regiment may have offered structure and survival, but not belonging. That distinction matters. Loyalty built on coercion rarely survives first contact with contradiction.

Daaga's life took another dramatic turn when he was deployed with British forces to North America. Here, in the early nineteenth century, the British Empire was grappling with unrest in its Canadian territories, culminating in the Upper Canada Rebellion of 1837.

For soldiers like Daaga, this meant being moved across oceans to suppress political unrest in environments utterly alien to them. The empire treated its soldiers as interchangeable units of force, regardless of origin or context.

But geography matters. And displacement sharpens awareness.

It was in this setting that Daaga's relationship with British authority began to fracture.

Accounts of Daaga's rebellion are fragmentary, but they converge on a consistent theme: refusal.

At some point during his service in Canada, Daaga and a group of fellow soldiers mutinied or deserted, rejecting their orders and, more importantly, rejecting the authority that had shaped their lives since capture. This was not a romantic uprising in the modern sense. It was an act of rupture, born from exhaustion, alienation, and the recognition that service had not delivered freedom, only relocation of bondage.

What makes Daaga's rebellion particularly striking is not just that he resisted, but who he resisted against: the same empire that had absorbed him, renamed him, and trained him to enforce its power.

He was not an outsider attacking empire. He was empire turning inward on itself.

It is tempting to frame Daaga as a simple anti-colonial hero, but doing so risks smoothing over the contradictions that define his story. His rebellion was not ideologically driven in the modern political sense. It was not nationalism as we understand it today.

Instead, it was something more elemental: refusal of disposability.

Daaga's act of rebellion exposes a critical truth about colonial military systems. They relied not on loyalty but on managed coercion. When that coercion weakened, through exhaustion, distance from home or exposure to alternative possibilities, collapse became not just possible but likely.

In that sense, Daaga was not an anomaly. He was an outcome.

The dual naming of Daaga and Donald Stewart is itself revealing. "Donald Stewart" appears in British military records, a name that erases origin and replaces it with something comfortably Scottish-sounding, bureaucratically legible and entirely detached from West African identity.

"Daaga," by contrast, survives as a fragment of pre-colonial existence, preserved through oral memory and scattered references. The tension between these names reflects the broader violence of colonial documentation: it records bodies but not selves.

To study Daaga is therefore to confront absence as much as presence. We know what empire called him. We know very little of what he called himself.

Like many colonial soldiers who resisted authority, Daaga's fate after rebellion is not richly documented. What is clear is that mutiny within imperial forces was treated with severity. Discipline was not merely administrative; it was performative, designed to reinforce the illusion of absolute control.

Whether Daaga was punished, imprisoned, or executed varies across accounts, but the broader outcome is consistent: silence. His story was not preserved as legacy but contained as warning.

This too is part of the historical pattern. Empire does not merely suppress rebellion; it suppresses narrative.

Daaga's life refuses neat interpretation. He was at once victim of enslavement, instrument of imperial warfare, and rebel against the very system that shaped him. Each identity complicates the others.

To read his biography is to confront an uncomfortable possibility, that empire did not simply create oppressors and oppressed, but blurred the boundary between them until survival itself became contradictory.

Perhaps the most honest way to understand Daaga is not to ask whether he was loyal or disloyal, hero or traitor, but to recognise that these categories fail under the weight of his experience.

He was, instead, a man repeatedly reshaped by power until he finally rejected its final claim: obedience without belonging.

And in that refusal, fragmentary, imperfect and costly, there is something that still resonates. ■

The British army's 'Black Corps'

How the West India regiments were recruited and controlled

In the long and often uncomfortable history of the British Empire, few military formations expose the contradictions of colonial rule as starkly as the West India Regiments. Sometimes referred to in contemporary commentary as a "Black Corps", these units composed largely of enslaved Africans, freedmen and liberated captives, served under the command of white British officers across the Caribbean from the late eighteenth century onwards. They were both indispensable and deeply feared within the imperial system: indispensable because they were effective soldiers in a brutal tropical theatre of war; feared because they embodied a paradox the Empire could never fully reconcile, armed Black men trained to fight for a system built on racial hierarchy.

To understand their creation is to understand the uneasy pragmatism of British imperial power at its height. The West India Regiments were not born of egalitarian impulse or enlightened reform. They were, instead, a wartime expedient shaped by disease, labour shortages and the strategic demands of holding Caribbean colonies in an era of near-constant imperial conflict with France and Spain.

The origins of the West India Regiments date to the late eighteenth century, particularly during the American Revolutionary War and the subsequent wars with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. The Caribbean was a theatre of immense strategic importance to Britain, yet European soldiers deployed there suffered catastrophic mortality rates due to yellow fever, malaria, and dysentery. Garrison strength collapsed not primarily through combat, but through illness.

In response, British military planners turned to a controversial solution, recruiting Black soldiers who were believed, wrongly but persistently, to be more resistant to tropical diseases. Recruitment took several forms, each revealing different layers of coercion and pragmatism.

Some soldiers were enslaved Africans purchased from plantation owners and offered conditional freedom in exchange for military service. Others were "liberated Africans", intercepted from slave ships after Britain's gradual abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807. These individuals were often apprenticed into military service under terms that blurred the line between emancipation and continued coercion. A smaller number were free Black men already living in the Caribbean, including those who had escaped slavery or purchased their own freedom.

What united them was not social status, but vulnerability. The promise of liberty was often conditional, delayed, or constrained. Even when emancipation was formally granted, it was tightly bound to continued military discipline and imperial service.

From the British perspective, this system was efficient. From the perspective of the recruits, it was often ambiguous at best and exploitative at worst. Freedom was not a clean break, but a negotiated

condition, subject to the authority of the same empire that had once enslaved many of them.

The West India Regiments were organised along rigidly hierarchical and racially segregated lines. Black soldiers served exclusively under white officers, reflecting the prevailing racial ideologies of the period. Commissioned ranks were almost entirely closed to men of African descent, reinforcing a system in which authority was racially coded and militarily enforced.

Barracks were segregated not only from civilian populations but also from other British troops. This separation was justified officially in terms of discipline and operational efficiency but it also reflected deep colonial anxieties. Armed Black soldiers represented both a solution and a threat, a solution to manpower shortages, and a potential threat to plantation societies built on racial subordination.

Discipline within the regiments was strict, often harsh. Punishments mirrored those used across the British Army of the period, flogging, confinement and public humiliation, but were intensified by racialized assumptions about control and obedience. Commanders frequently expressed concern that morale needed to be tightly managed to prevent unrest or desertion.

At the same time, the West India Regiments were carefully cultivated as elite colonial troops. They were well-drilled, uniformed, and deployed in key defensive operations across the Caribbean. Their presence in garrisons from Jamaica to Trinidad provided Britain with a reliable military force in regions where European soldiers struggled to survive.

The central tension surrounding the West India Regiments was not merely logistical but psychological and political. In a slave so-

ciety, the sight of armed Black men in uniform, paid, trained and disciplined, was inherently destabilising.

Plantation owners and colonial administrators often viewed the regiments with suspicion. They feared that military training could inspire rebellion or provide organisational skills that might be turned against the colonial order. These anxieties were not unfounded in abstract terms; the Caribbean had already witnessed major slave revolts, most notably the Haitian Revolution, which profoundly altered imperial attitudes toward Black military capacity.

British authorities attempted to manage this tension through strict segregation and careful deployment. Regiments were often stationed away from plantation centres or rotated between colonies to prevent local ties from forming. Their loyalty was assumed to rest not on shared identity with enslaved populations, but on military discipline and the limited privileges granted to soldiers.

Yet this assumption was itself fragile. Many soldiers had direct experience of slavery or plantation labour. Their position placed them in a liminal space, neither fully free in a civic sense, nor fully enslaved. They occupied what might be described as a controlled form of mobility within the imperial system, one that depended entirely on continued obedience.

Despite these tensions, the West India Regiments proved militarily effective. They participated in numerous campaigns across the Caribbean and West Africa, including the capture of enemy colonies and the suppression of internal unrest. Their endurance in tropical conditions made them invaluable compared to European troops.

In the nineteenth century, they were also deployed in broader imperial policing roles. As Britain expanded its global reach, these reg-

iments became part of a wider network of colonial military labour used to secure imperial interests far beyond the Caribbean.

However, their service was rarely framed in terms of equality or recognition. Instead, they were instrumentalised as a solution to a problem created by empire itself: how to maintain control over vast, disease-ridden territories with a limited European military presence.

The West India Regiments were eventually disbanded in the early twentieth century as military structures evolved and colonial governance changed. Yet their legacy remains deeply embedded in the history of both the British Army and the Caribbean.

On one hand, they represent a form of constrained agency. Enslaved and freed Africans used the limited opportunities available to them to secure freedom, wages, and relative autonomy within an oppressive system. On the other hand, they embody the stark inequalities of imperial power: a system in which Black bodies were disciplined, armed and deployed to defend an empire that denied them full political and social rights.

Modern historical interpretation has increasingly moved away from viewing such regiments as simple anomalies within British military history. Instead, they are now understood as central to the functioning of empire itself. Without them, Britain's ability to maintain control in the Caribbean would have been significantly weakened.

The story of the West India Regiments is not one of straightforward oppression or uncomplicated heroism. It is a story of contradiction, of an empire that relied on the labour, discipline, and courage of men it systematically marginalised.

To call them a "Black Corps" is to acknowledge both their cohesion and the racial logic that defined their existence. They were soldiers of empire, but also products of coercion, survival, and negotiated freedom. Their history forces us to confront a difficult truth: that imperial power often depended on those it refused to fully recognise.

In that sense, the West India Regiments are not a footnote in British military history. They are a mirror, reflecting the tensions, compromises, and moral ambiguities at the heart of empire itself. ■

1837 Trinidad
A colony between slavery and apprenticeship

In 1837, Trinidad stood at an uneasy crossroads of empire. The formal end of slavery in the British West Indies had arrived only three years earlier with the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, yet emancipation in practice remained deeply compromised. What replaced slavery was not freedom in any meaningful sense, but the so-called "apprenticeship system" a transitional arrangement that bound formerly enslaved people to their former masters for up to six years of compulsory labour. It was within this fragile and contested framework that unrest simmered, culminating in mutinous resistance that exposed the contradictions of Britain's moral and economic ambitions in the Caribbean.

The apprenticeship system was presented in London as a pragmatic compromise. Planters, whose wealth depended on plantation labour, were reassured that their estates would not collapse overnight. Meanwhile, abolitionists were told that emancipation was being gradually prepared for; allowing formerly enslaved people time to adjust to "freedom." In reality, it was a carefully disguised extension of coercion. Apprentices were still required to work fixed hours on plantations, often under conditions barely dis-

tinguishable from slavery. They could be punished for "idleness," bound to estates, and denied genuine autonomy over their labour or mobility.

In Trinidad, these contradictions were especially stark. The island's plantation economy remained heavily dependent on sugar production, and colonial authorities were under constant pressure from landowners to maintain order and productivity. Yet the labour force, newly conscious of its changed legal status, increasingly resisted the notion that freedom could be delayed or rationed.

The mutiny that emerged in this context was not a sudden eruption of chaos, but the result of accumulated frustration. Apprenticed workers questioned why, if slavery had been abolished, they were still being forced to labour under threat of punishment. They asked why the promise of freedom was always deferred, always conditional. For many, the apprenticeship system did not represent transition but deception.

Colonial officials in Trinidad found themselves in an impossible position. On paper, they were tasked with enforcing a system designed in Westminster; on the ground, they faced a population

that increasingly refused to accept its legitimacy. The authority of plantation owners, once absolute under slavery, now depended on a legal fiction that was rapidly unravelling. When workers withdrew their labour or openly defied orders, the colonial response oscillated between negotiation and repression, revealing the fragility of imperial control.

What is particularly striking about Trinidad in this period is how quickly the language of morality gave way to the language of necessity. British policymakers had justified abolition on humanitarian grounds, presenting it as a triumph of civilisation. Yet within a few years, economic stability and plantation profitability were again prioritised over genuine freedom. Apprenticeship became a mechanism for managing emancipation in a way that protected property rights more than human rights.

The mutiny forced colonial authorities to confront an uncomfortable truth: emancipation cannot be partially enforced. Either people are free, or they are not. The attempt to occupy a middle ground created not stability, but tension. Apprenticeship blurred the line between coerced labour and freedom so thoroughly that it ultimately satisfied neither planters nor the formerly enslaved.

From a modern perspective, the system appears as an uneasy compromise born of imperial hesitation. Britain had abolished slavery in principle but remained unwilling to dismantle the economic structures that depended on it. Trinidad became a testing ground for this contradiction, and the events of 1837 demonstrated how unsustainable such a model was. Resistance was not merely an act of rebellion; it was an assertion of clarity against ambiguity, of lived experience against legislative abstraction.

By the time apprenticeship was finally abolished in 1838, a year earlier than originally planned due to mounting pressure and un-

rest, it was clear that the system had failed on its own terms. It had neither eased the transition to freedom nor preserved plantation discipline in any lasting sense. Instead, it had prolonged the injustice it was supposedly designed to end.

The legacy of this period in Trinidad is therefore not simply one of emancipation delayed, but of emancipation contested. It reveals how freedom, when treated as a negotiable process rather than an absolute right, becomes vulnerable to distortion. It also highlights the agency of those who lived through it, individuals who refused to accept that liberty could be postponed by bureaucratic decree.

Looking back, the mutiny of 1837 can be understood not as an isolated colonial disturbance, but as part of a broader historical reckoning. It exposed the gap between imperial rhetoric and imperial reality, between the language of abolition and the persistence of control. In doing so, it helped hasten the end of apprenticeship and forced Britain to confront the limits of gradual emancipation.

Trinidad's experience during these years stands as a reminder that transitional justice, when designed to protect power rather than dismantle it, risks becoming a continuation of the very system it claims to replace. ■

TOGETHER WE CAN **STOP** RACISM NOW

London's reaction and fears of a Caribbean domino effect

When news of unrest within the West India Regiment reached London, it did not arrive as a contained colonial incident. It arrived, rather, as a question mark hanging over the entire imperial structure in the Caribbean. Within the corridors of Whitehall, particularly in the Colonial Office and the War Office, the event was not treated as an isolated act of indiscipline but as a potential contagion. The fear was not simply that soldiers had disobeyed orders, but that they had demonstrated that imperial authority could be questioned and worse, imitated.

At the heart of London's anxiety lay a single, unsettling possibility: that mutiny, once visible, might become transferable.

By the mid-19th century, Britain's Caribbean possessions were already undergoing profound transformation. The abolition of slavery in 1834 and full emancipation in 1838 had reshaped the labour system, destabilised plantation economies, and forced a recalibration of colonial governance. The British state, however, still relied heavily on military presence to maintain order, particularly in territories where for-

mer enslaved populations vastly outnumbered European administrators.

The 1st West India Regiment, composed largely of Black soldiers under white British officers, was central to this arrangement. It was, in theory, a symbol of imperial integration: proof that loyalty to the Crown transcended race and origin. In practice, however, it was also a site of tension, inequality, and suspicion.

Thus, when unrest emerged within its ranks, London did not see merely a disciplinary breakdown. It saw the potential collapse of a carefully balanced imperial equation.

Within the Colonial Office, the initial response was bureaucratic but laced with unease. Dispatches were scrutinised not only for facts but for implications. Officials asked not only what happened, but what this might encourage elsewhere.

A recurring concern was that the regiment's composition made it uniquely dangerous as a precedent. If disciplined, trained Black soldiers serving under the Crown, no less, could collectively resist authority, then what message would that send to the wider populations of Jamaica, Barbados, or the Bahamas, where emancipation had already loosened the old hierarchies?

Memoranda from the period reveal a subtle but persistent fear: that the act of mutiny was less important than its visibility. The worry was not confined to the barracks, but extended to plantations, port cities, and colonial assemblies. Information, once circulated, might travel faster than troops could be deployed.

In this sense, the Colonial Office's greatest fear was not rebellion itself, but imitation.

If the Colonial Office thought in administrative terms, the War

Office thought in operational ones. Its officials were less concerned with political reform and more with the integrity of command structures. For them, the mutiny represented a failure of discipline that could reverberate across all colonial garrisons.

The Caribbean was dotted with small, strategically dispersed military installations. Each relied on a relatively small number of European officers commanding locally recruited troops. This structure was efficient in times of calm but perilously fragile in moments of dissent.

War Office correspondence reflects a recurring phrase: "the danger of example." This concept captured the belief that mutiny was not an endpoint but a trigger. If one regiment refused orders without immediate and decisive suppression, others might follow, not necessarily out of shared grievance but out of recalculated risk.

In other words, obedience in the empire was seen as conditional, and therefore fragile. The War Office feared that once the condition was broken in one place, it might be questioned everywhere.

Particular attention was paid to Jamaica, where the largest population of formerly enslaved people lived under the supervision of a still-powerful plantation elite. Officials worried that unrest among soldiers could spill into civilian life, especially in rural districts where resentment over land, wages, and political exclusion remained acute.

Barbados, often viewed in London as more stable due to its entrenched planter class and smaller Black majority, was nevertheless included in contingency planning. Stability there was assumed rather than guaranteed, and assumptions, in imperial governance, were increasingly recognised as dangerous.

The Bahamas, newly emancipated in administrative terms and less economically central, nonetheless featured in discussions because of its symbolic importance. If even a "minor" colony showed signs of unrest, the psychological impact on the empire's perceived coherence could be disproportionate.

Thus, across these territories, London saw not separate societies, but interconnected pressure points.

What becomes clear from the archival record is that fear itself functioned as an informal policy instrument. It shaped decisions about troop deployments, intelligence gathering and communication control. Rumours were treated with unusual seriousness, not because they were likely to be true, but because they were likely to be believed.

The empire, in this sense, was governed as much by perception as by force.

Officials debated whether to reinforce garrisons, rotate officers more frequently, or restrict interaction between soldiers and civil-

ian populations. Underlying all these discussions was a single assumption: that stability depended on preventing sympathy from forming across social groups.

Mutiny, therefore, was not just a military concern. It was a social one.

The phrase that captures the spirit of the period, though rarely formalised in a single document, is what might be called the "Caribbean domino effect." It reflects the belief that colonial unrest would not remain localised. Instead, it would cascade across territories linked by geography, labour migration and shared imperial governance.

This logic was not entirely irrational. Communication between islands was frequent, maritime movement constant, and colonial administrations often shared personnel and intelligence. Yet the extent to which officials feared rapid, coordinated rebellion often exceeded the practical realities of Caribbean society.

What is striking, in retrospect, is not that London considered contagion possible, but that it considered it likely enough to influence policy at the highest levels.

Underlying all these debates was a deeper contradiction. The British Empire relied on the loyalty of colonial troops while simultaneously constructing racial hierarchies that denied them equality. The West India Regiment embodied this tension more clearly than most institutions.

On one hand, it demonstrated that Black soldiers could be disciplined, effective, and integral to imperial defence. On the other, it rested on a strict separation of authority, opportunity and trust.

When mutiny occurred, therefore, it was interpreted not merely as a breach of military order, but as a disruption of racialized expectations. The anxiety in London was not just about disobedience, but about the possibility that obedience itself might be reconsidered.

In the end, the reaction of the Colonial Office and War Office reveals less about the specific incident of mutiny than about the structure of imperial anxiety itself. The Caribbean was not seen as a collection of distinct colonies but as a connected system whose stability depended on the uninterrupted flow of authority from centre to periphery.

The fear of a domino effect was, in many ways, a fear of imperial coherence collapsing under its own contradictions.

London's officials understood, perhaps more clearly than they admitted, that the empire's strength lay not in its size but in its perception of inevitability. Once that perception was challenged the entire structure became subject to doubt.

And doubt, within an empire built on confidence, was the most dangerous force of all. ■

#savethechildren

Mass execution and public display

How Trinidad's government reasserted control

In the history of the Daaga Rebellion, few episodes reveal the raw machinery of colonial power more clearly than the brutal reprisals that followed the uprising. The executions, public spectacles of death, and deliberate displays of mutilated bodies were not acts of spontaneous anger. They were calculated demonstrations of authority. Through fear, humiliation, and carefully orchestrated violence, the colonial government in Trinidad sought to restore obedience among both the enslaved and the wider free population.

The rebellion itself was relatively small in military terms. Yet the response from the authorities was immense. Colonial officials feared not merely the rebels before them, but the possibility that resistance might spread across the Caribbean at a time when slavery was already under attack from abolitionists and when memories of the Haitian Revolution still haunted plantation societies. Every revolt, however limited, threatened to expose the fragility of imperial rule.

The punishments imposed after the rebellion therefore became a political statement. They were intended to crush dissent, intimidate the enslaved population,

reassure plantation owners and demonstrate that the British colonial state remained supreme.

Colonial governments in the Caribbean rarely distinguished between justice and deterrence. The law existed not only to punish crimes, but to maintain the plantation order upon which imperial wealth depended. Trinidad's authorities understood that slave rebellions were not isolated criminal acts. They were ideological threats to the entire structure of colonial society.

The leader of the rebellion, Daaga, embodied those fears. Daaga was believed to have been born in West Africa and had reportedly served as a warrior before his enslavement. Colonial accounts portrayed him as disciplined, charismatic, and dangerous. To officials, this combination made him especially threatening because he represented organised resistance rather than random disorder.

After the uprising was suppressed, colonial authorities moved quickly to ensure that the punishment would resonate far beyond the courtroom. Around forty death sentences were issued. Not all were ultimately carried out, partly because colonial administrators recognised that mass executions on too large a scale could provoke further unrest. Yet fifteen executions were deemed essential.

These were not quiet legal proceedings hidden from public view. They were public theatre.

Daaga's death was intended to symbolise the destruction of rebellion itself. He was executed by firing squad in Port of Spain, a method that carried particular significance. Hanging was the common execution for criminals, but firing squads often implied military rebellion or treason. The authorities wished to portray Daaga not merely as a runaway slave or criminal agitator, but as an enemy combatant against the colonial state.

Witness accounts from the period suggest that large crowds gathered to observe the execution. Public punishments in the Caribbean served several purposes simultaneously. For white colonists, they reassured a fearful population that order had been restored. For enslaved Africans, they were intended as warnings written in blood.

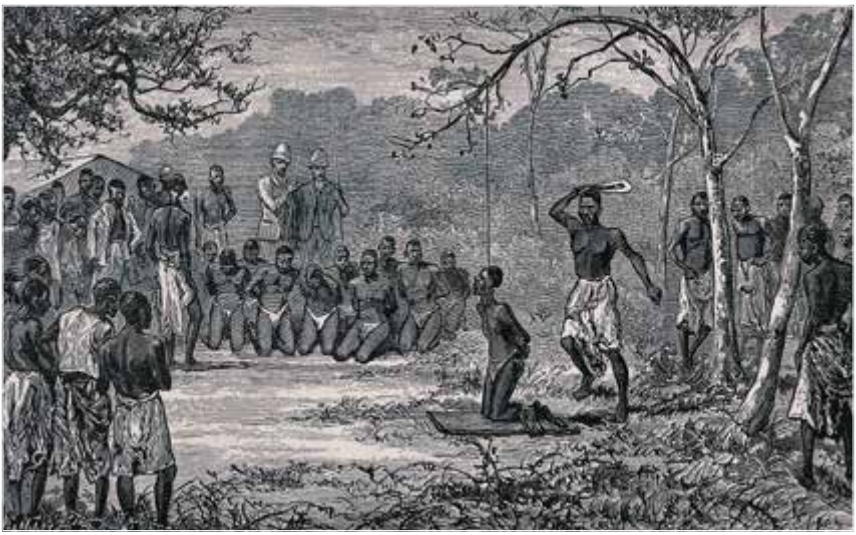
The execution site itself became a stage upon which imperial power performed its authority. Soldiers, magistrates, clergy, and officials all played ceremonial roles. The message was unmistakable: rebellion would end not only in death but in public annihilation.

There is a tendency in some traditional colonial histories to present such punishments as regrettable necessities of the era. That interpretation deserves challenge. Even by nineteenth-century standards, the reprisals in Trinidad reflected an extreme commitment to terror as governance.

Perhaps the most shocking aspect of the repression was the public display of severed heads mounted on poles. Such acts were rooted in older traditions of imperial punishment stretching back centuries. Across European empires, the bodies of rebels were frequently mutilated and exhibited to discourage imitation. In the Caribbean, where enslaved populations vastly outnumbered whites on many islands, colonial authorities believed terror to be indispensable.

The display of heads was intended to destroy more than the physical body. It sought to erase dignity, identity, and memory. By transforming rebels into grotesque public objects, the state attempted to reduce resistance to shame and horror.

Yet these displays also revealed insecurity. Governments confident in their legitimacy rarely need to mutilate corpses in public squares. The colonial administration understood that military victory alone was insufficient. Psychological domination mattered equally.



For enslaved Africans, the spectacle carried layered meanings. Undoubtedly, many experienced fear. But such punishments could also produce anger, martyrdom, and silent solidarity. Colonial authorities often misunderstood this dynamic. Brutality could suppress revolt temporarily while deepening hatred over generations.

Indeed, the memory of executed rebels frequently survived long after official reports faded into archives. Figures like Daaga became symbols not because they won, but because they resisted.

The aftermath of the rebellion exposes a difficult truth about colonial justice: the courts were never neutral institutions. Trials involving enslaved people were shaped by racial hierarchy, economic interests, and political fear.

The legal proceedings following the uprising moved rapidly. Colonial authorities had little interest in prolonged deliberation. Speed itself conveyed power. Harsh sentencing signalled decisiveness. Mercy, when shown, was selective and strategic rather than humanitarian.

It is important to recognise that the British Empire often celebrated itself as a beacon of civilisation and law. Yet in the colonies, those ideals were applied unevenly. The same empire that increasingly debated liberty and reform in Britain relied upon spectacular violence overseas.

This contradiction sat at the heart of imperial governance. Colonial officials frequently defended brutal punishments as unfortunate necessities required to govern supposedly "unruly" populations. In reality, such arguments revealed how dependent the plantation system was upon coercion.

The executions in Trinidad were therefore not aberrations. They were manifestations of a broader imperial logic.

The reprisals reshaped Trinidadian society in profound ways. For the white planter class, the executions temporarily restored confidence. Plantation owners feared slave revolts obsessively, and public punishment offered reassurance that the colonial state would protect their interests at any cost.

For the enslaved and free Black population, the consequences were more complex. Open resistance became even more dangerous. Surveillance increased. Informants were rewarded. Gatherings drew suspicion. Colonial governance tightened through both legal and informal means.

Yet repression could not erase the broader currents transforming the Atlantic world. By the 1830s, slavery itself was under mounting pressure. The Slavery Abolition Act 1833 had already begun dismantling slavery across the British Empire, though systems of apprenticeship and racial inequality endured. Colonial authorities feared that rebellion might accelerate demands for deeper change.

Ironically, the harshness of reprisals often strengthened abolitionist arguments abroad. Reports of executions and mutilations exposed the violence required to sustain colonial rule. British reformers increasingly questioned whether an empire dependent upon terror could truly claim moral legitimacy.

Modern historical memory has gradually re-evaluated figures once condemned as criminals by colonial authorities. Daaga is now often viewed not as a traitor, but as a resistance figure shaped by the brutality of enslavement and imperial domination.

This shift matters because history is never merely about facts; it is also about perspective. Colonial archives largely recorded events through the eyes of officials, magistrates, and plantation elites. Recovering the experiences and motivations of the oppressed requires reading against those records.

The public display of severed heads was intended to erase rebellion from history through fear. Instead, it helped immortalise it.

Today, discussions about colonial violence remain politically sensitive because they challenge comforting narratives about empire. The British Empire undeniably built infrastructure, trade networks, and institutions across vast territories. But it also maintained power through coercion, racial hierarchy, and at times extraordinary brutality.

The Trinidad reprisals force us to confront that reality directly.

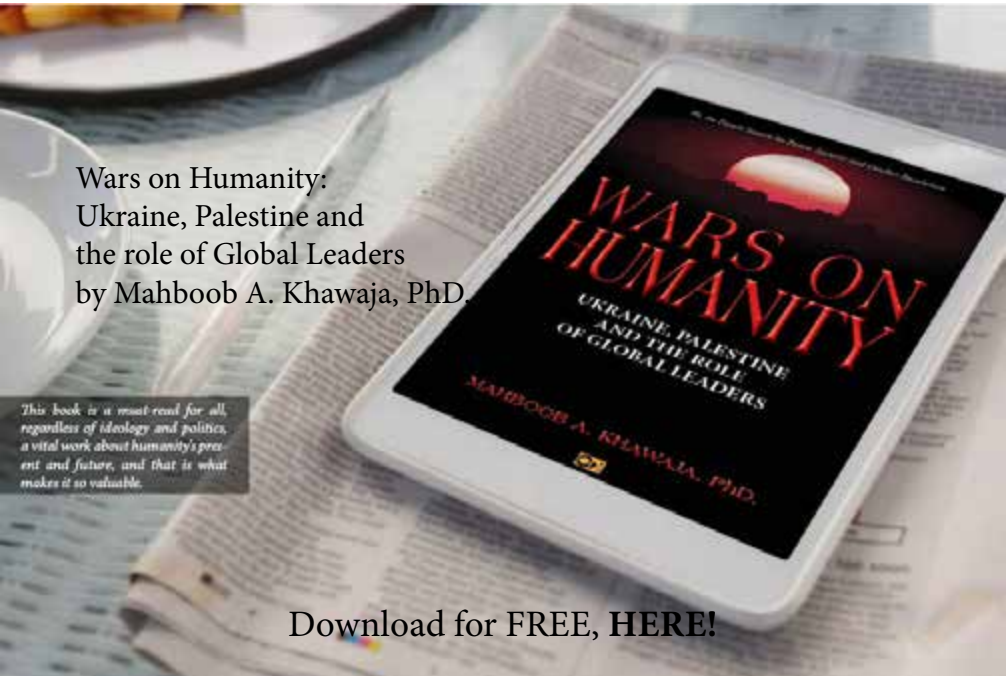
The executions following the rebellion in Trinidad were more than punishments for a failed uprising. They were instruments of statecraft. Through firing squads, death sentences, and public displays of mutilated bodies, colonial authorities attempted to reassert control over a deeply unstable society.

In the short term, they succeeded. The rebellion was crushed. Fear spread. Order, at least outwardly, returned.

But terror has limits as a governing philosophy. Violence may suppress resistance temporarily, yet it rarely eliminates the grievances that produce rebellion in the first place. The spectacle of colonial punishment revealed not only imperial strength, but imperial anxiety.

Daaga's severed body was meant to symbolise defeat. Instead, history increasingly remembers him as evidence of the human refusal to submit quietly to oppression.

That may be the ultimate irony of colonial justice in Trinidad, the more violently the state attempted to erase rebellion, the more enduring its memory became. ■


Wars on Humanity:
Ukraine, Palestine and
the role of Global Leaders
by Mahboob A. Khawaja, PhD.
This book is a must-read for all, regardless of ideology and politics, a vital work about humanity's present and future, and that is what makes it so valuable.
WARS ON HUMANITY
UKRAINE, PALESTINE AND THE ROLE OF GLOBAL LEADERS
MAHBOOB A. KHAWAJA, PhD.
Download for FREE, HERE!

The end of the first West India regiment

Mutiny, fear and the British Empire's politics of division

The story of the First West India Regiment is one of the most revealing yet neglected episodes in the military history of the British Empire. It is a story that forces uncomfortable questions about race, loyalty, colonial anxiety, and the methods by which imperial powers maintained control over both conquered peoples and their own soldiers. The disbandment of the First West India Regiment in 1838, following mutiny and unrest within the corps, was not merely an administrative military decision. It represented a turning point in British colonial policy, a moment when the Empire openly embraced ethnic fragmentation as a deliberate strategy of governance.

The consequences extended far beyond a single regiment. What followed was a systematic restructuring of recruitment policies across colonial forces, guided by a simple but ruthless principle, never again should soldiers from similar backgrounds unite strongly enough to challenge imperial authority.

To understand why the British reacted with such severity, one must first understand what the West In-

dia Regiments actually were, why they existed, and why their existence made many imperial officials deeply uneasy.

The West India Regiments emerged during the late eighteenth century, when Britain's Caribbean colonies were among the most valuable possessions in the world. Sugar plantations in islands such as Jamaica, Barbados, and Saint Lucia generated enormous wealth, but maintaining control over these territories was increasingly difficult.

European troops suffered catastrophic death rates in the Caribbean climate. Yellow fever, malaria, dysentery, and heat exhaustion killed soldiers in astonishing numbers. Entire regiments could be crippled within months. The British military therefore turned toward a solution that colonial officials had long debated: the recruitment of Black soldiers for imperial service.

Many recruits were formerly enslaved Africans purchased from slave ships, while others were free men recruited locally or from Africa itself. The morality of the system was deeply contradictory. Britain claimed these regiments represented military pragmatism and even opportunity, yet many of the soldiers had effectively been forced into service through structures inseparable from slavery.

Nevertheless, the regiments became highly effective fighting forces. They fought in conflicts against the French, suppressed slave uprisings, defended colonial possessions and served across the Caribbean and West Africa. British commanders frequently praised their endurance and discipline.

Yet admiration always coexisted with fear.

The British colonial establishment depended upon rigid racial hierarchy. Armed Black men serving in organised military units un-

settled plantation societies built upon white supremacy. The spectacle of disciplined Black soldiers carrying weapons and wearing the King's uniform directly challenged the ideological foundations of slavery.

This contradiction lay at the heart of imperial anxieties.

No event terrified Caribbean slave societies more than the Haitian Revolution. Beginning in 1791, enslaved people in the French colony of Saint-Domingue launched a revolution that ultimately destroyed slavery and created the independent state of Haiti.

For British authorities, Haiti became both nightmare and warning.

The revolution demonstrated that enslaved and formerly enslaved people could organise militarily, defeat European armies and overturn colonial rule altogether. Plantation owners across the Caribbean became obsessed with the possibility of similar uprisings spreading elsewhere.

Against this backdrop, the existence of Black regiments within the British Army appeared increasingly dangerous. Colonial officials wanted loyal soldiers but they also feared the emergence of military solidarity rooted in shared African identity, shared oppression, or common grievances against colonial authority.

The First West India Regiment became caught within these contradictions.

By the 1830s, the British Empire itself was changing rapidly. The abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1833 transformed the political atmosphere across the Caribbean. Emancipation did not bring equality; instead, it produced uncertainty, resentment among plantation elites and intense fears about social instability.

Black soldiers within the West India Regiments occupied a deeply ambiguous position. They were instruments of imperial power, yet they themselves faced discrimination, unequal treatment, and limited opportunities for advancement.

Pay disparities, harsh discipline, poor living conditions, and racial prejudice contributed to growing dissatisfaction. British officers often viewed their own men through paternalistic and openly racist assumptions. Promotions for Black soldiers were restricted, while punishments could be severe and humiliating.

At the same time, emancipation altered expectations among Black populations throughout the Caribbean. Soldiers increasingly recognised the contradiction between fighting for an empire that continued to deny them full dignity and equality.

The mutiny that ultimately led to the destruction of the First West India Regiment did not emerge from nowhere. It was the result of years of accumulated grievances, mistrust, and imperial hypocrisy.

When unrest erupted within the regiment, British authorities reacted not merely with concern but with alarm bordering on panic.

The fear was never simply military indiscipline. Armies experience mutinies throughout history. What made this case particularly alarming to colonial officials was the racial and political dimension attached to it.

British authorities feared contagion.

A mutiny within a Black regiment stationed in the Caribbean carried symbolic implications far greater than its immediate military consequences. Officials worried that rebellion among armed Black troops might inspire broader unrest among emancipated populations across the colonies.

The Empire's response therefore aimed not only to restore order but also to send a message.

The First West India Regiment was disbanded in 1838.

Official explanations focused upon discipline and military necessity, yet beneath the language of administration lay something more revealing: a profound fear of collective identity among colonial troops.

The most important consequence of the mutiny was not simply the dissolution of one regiment. It was the emergence of a deliberate recruitment policy designed specifically to prevent solidarity.

British authorities concluded that troops sharing common ethnicity, language, regional identity, or cultural background posed a potential threat if grievances developed. The solution was calculated fragmentation.

Future recruitment policies increasingly mixed ethnic groups within regiments and garrisons. Soldiers from different islands, African backgrounds, linguistic traditions, and cultural communities were deliberately combined in ways intended to weaken collective identity.

This was divide and rule transformed into military doctrine.

The logic was brutally simple. Soldiers who lacked strong shared identity would supposedly find it harder to organise mutiny or rebellion. Mutual suspicion and cultural division became tools of imperial management.

This strategy later appeared across the British Empire in different forms. In India after the Revolt of 1857, British recruitment policies increasingly favoured selected "martial races" while balancing ethnic and religious groups against one another. In Africa, colonial armies often recruited from communities considered politically isolated or traditionally hostile to local populations.

The lesson British authorities believed they had learned from the West India Regiment was clear: unity among colonised soldiers was dangerous.

The destruction of the First West India Regiment exposes one of the central moral contradictions of the British Empire.

The Empire demanded loyalty from colonial subjects while simultaneously refusing to trust them fully. Black soldiers were expected to fight, die, and maintain imperial order, yet their loyalty was constantly questioned precisely because of their race.

When these soldiers demonstrated discipline, they were praised as useful instruments of empire. When they expressed grievances or resisted mistreatment, they were viewed as existential threats.

This contradiction was not accidental. It reflected the racial logic underpinning imperial rule itself.

The British Empire relied heavily upon colonised peoples for military manpower. Indian soldiers, African troops, Caribbean regiments, and countless others formed the backbone of imperial defence. Yet the Empire also feared the political consequences of arming the very populations it subordinated.

Thus, colonial military policy became an endless balancing act between dependence and paranoia.

One of the striking aspects of the First West India Regiment's story is how rarely it appears in mainstream British historical memory.

British military history often celebrates imperial victories while neglecting the internal tensions and racial politics that sustained imperial power. The West India Regiments are sometimes mentioned as colourful colonial units, yet the deeper implications of their existence are frequently overlooked.

Their story challenges comforting narratives about benevolent empire.

It forces recognition that colonial military systems were shaped not merely by strategy but by racial engineering. Recruitment policies were not neutral administrative decisions. They were political tools designed to manage fear, suppress unity, and maintain hierarchy.

The disbandment of the First West India Regiment illustrates how quickly imperial praise could turn into repression once colonial troops appeared politically conscious or collectively organised.

Modern readers should resist simplistic interpretations of the mutiny as either straightforward rebellion or simple indiscipline.

The soldiers of the West India Regiment existed within an impossible situation. They served an empire that exploited their labour, limited their rights, and viewed them with suspicion. Yet military service also offered wages, status, and in some cases a path away from plantation life.

Their grievances reflected broader tensions throughout post-emancipation Caribbean society.

The mutiny therefore deserves to be understood not merely as a military incident but as part of the larger struggle over freedom, citizenship, and dignity in the aftermath of slavery.

Indeed, the British reaction reveals how fragile imperial confidence truly was. An empire ruling vast territories across the globe remained deeply fearful of solidarity among the people upon whom its power depended.

The end of the First West India Regiment in 1838 marked far more than the closure of a military unit. It revealed the insecurities at the heart of British colonial rule.

The mutiny convinced imperial authorities that ethnic cohesion among colonial soldiers represented a political danger. In response, Britain adopted recruitment policies designed to fragment identity and prevent unity. Ethnic mixing within regiments became a calculated mechanism of control, an attempt to ensure that soldiers would never again develop the solidarity necessary to challenge imperial authority collectively.

This strategy would echo throughout the nineteenth-century Empire.

Yet the legacy of the First West India Regiment should not be reduced solely to imperial fear. The regiment also stands as evidence of the complicated role Black soldiers played within British history: indispensable to imperial power, yet never fully accepted within it.

Their story deserves greater attention precisely because it exposes the uncomfortable truths empire often tried to hide, that beneath the language of loyalty and civilisation lay deep anxieties about race, equality and the dangerous possibility of unity among the colonised.

Download for FREE, HERE!
DAVID SPARENBERG
Nonviolent MANIFESTO
by David Sparenberg
If you are only going to read one book in the next six months, let this be your choice. Reading can be quick and easily referenced. The word count is small. Thought content communicates experiential wealth and may provide reflections of enduring value.
Nonviolent MANIFESTO

Daaga: The forgotten pan-African martyr of Trinidad

History has an uneven memory. Some rebels become immortal symbols, their names engraved into national consciousness, repeated in classrooms and political speeches for generations. Others, despite courage no less extraordinary, fade into the margins of public remembrance. Among the forgotten stands Daaga, a man whose resistance against slavery and colonial domination in Trinidad deserves recognition alongside the great anti-slavery figures of the Atlantic world.

While names such as Tacky and Samuel Sharpe occupy honoured places in Caribbean historical memory, Daaga remains largely obscure outside specialist circles. In Trinidad itself, his legacy survives mostly through fragments, oral traditions, scattered references in historical works, and a handful of place names that many citizens pass without recognising their significance. There is no towering national monument in his honour, no widespread public commemoration, and no consistent inclusion of his story within broader Pan-African narratives. That absence says as much about the politics of memory as it does about the man himself.

Daaga's story begins far from Trinidad. He is believed to have originated in West Africa, likely among peoples affected by the violent disruptions of the transatlantic slave trade during the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Like countless Africans uprooted by European commerce and warfare, he was forced into the brutal machinery of plantation slavery.

Yet Daaga was not simply absorbed into colonial society as a passive victim. He carried with him memories, identities, and traditions that slavery could not entirely erase. This is a crucial point often neglected in older colonial histories. Enslaved Africans did not arrive in the Caribbean as blank slates. They brought political cultures, military experience, religious beliefs, and social systems. Many rebellions in the Caribbean drew directly upon African organisational traditions.

In Trinidad, Daaga became associated with resistance among the so-called "Company Villages" and military labour systems that

emerged under British colonial rule. Historical records surrounding him are fragmented, partly because colonial authorities documented enslaved resistance selectively and often through hostile lenses. Rebels were usually described as criminals rather than political actors. Their motives were distorted, simplified, or erased altogether.

Nevertheless, enough evidence survives to suggest that Daaga became a symbol of organised defiance against imperial authority. His resistance was not merely an isolated outburst of desperation. It reflected a broader Atlantic struggle in which enslaved Africans repeatedly challenged the legitimacy of colonial rule.

One reason Daaga faded from popular memory lies in the way empires recorded history. Colonial administrations preferred narratives that portrayed slavery as a regrettable but civilising institution gradually reformed through enlightened governance. Violent resistance complicated that narrative. Rebels demonstrated that emancipation was not simply "granted" by benevolent legislators in London; it was demanded, fought for, and often paid for in blood.

The British Empire, particularly during the Victorian era, cultivated an image of moral leadership through abolition. Yet this self-image depended upon downplaying the extent of enslaved resistance across the Caribbean. Figures who openly challenged colonial power with force could not easily fit within imperial mythology.

As a result, rebels who survived in popular memory often did so because later nationalist movements revived them. Jamaica, for example, elevated Tacky and Sam Sharpe into foundational symbols of anti-colonial identity. Tacky's 1760 rebellion became celebrated as evidence of African military sophistication and revolutionary consciousness. Sam Sharpe's leadership during the Baptist War of 1831–32 became central to Jamaica's national story because his uprising directly accelerated emancipation debates in Britain.

Trinidad followed a different historical trajectory. Unlike Jamaica or Haiti, Trinidad did not develop a single dominant rebellion myth around which nationalism could crystallise. Its population evolved through successive migrations, African, Indian, Chinese, Syrian, Lebanese and European, producing a richly plural society but also a more fragmented historical memory. In that environment, Daaga never became the singular emblem of resistance that Sharpe became in Jamaica.

Yet forgetting is never absolute. Across Trinidad, traces of Daaga's legacy endured through oral culture. Stories passed between generations preserved fragments of his resistance long after official archives had reduced him to a footnote.

This survival matters enormously. Oral tradition has often been dismissed by colonial historians as unreliable folklore. In reality, it functioned as a vital counter-archive for oppressed communities denied access to formal historical institutions. Songs, stories, and communal memory preserved truths that imperial documents either ignored or intentionally buried.

Within Afro-Trinidadian cultural memory, Daaga persisted as a figure associated with dignity, defiance, and African pride. His name occasionally surfaced in discussions of resistance heritage, particularly during the twentieth-century rise of Black consciousness movements in the Caribbean.

The emergence of Pan-African thought in Trinidad during the 1960s and 1970s briefly revived interest in forgotten African rebels. Intellectuals and activists connected local struggles against inequality to a broader global history of African resistance. In that political climate, Daaga acquired renewed symbolic importance.

This revival is particularly significant given Trinidad's central role in global Black political thought. The island produced influential figures such as C. L. R. James and Stokely Carmichael, both of whom profoundly shaped anti-colonial and Pan-African discourse. Yet even within traditions deeply concerned with liberation history, Daaga remained relatively peripheral.

That marginality reveals a difficult truth: even revolutionary cultures create hierarchies of remembrance.

The contrast between Daaga and Sam Sharpe is illuminating. Sharpe enjoys near-sacred status in Jamaica. He appears on currency, monuments and school syllabuses. Public spaces bear his name. Every Jamaican child encounters his story.

Why did Sharpe become immortal while Daaga drifted towards obscurity?

Part of the answer lies in documentation. Sharpe's rebellion generated extensive colonial correspondence because it threatened the economic foundations of Jamaica at a critical moment. British authorities treated the Baptist War as a major imperial crisis. Consequently, historians inherited abundant records.

Daaga, by comparison, emerged from smaller-scale resistance traditions that produced fewer surviving documents. Historical visibility often depends less on the significance of events themselves than on how extensively authorities recorded them.

Another factor is nationalism. Jamaica's independence movement actively cultivated heroic rebel ancestors to construct a coherent national identity. Trinidadian nationalism, though certainly anti-colonial, developed within a more ethnically diverse and politically complex environment. Historical symbols were therefore distributed more diffusely.

There is also an uncomfortable dimension involving respectability politics. Colonial and post-colonial societies alike have often preferred rebels who can be portrayed as morally restrained or religiously dignified. Violent resistance, especially resistance associated with African militancy, tends to unsettle official narratives.

Daaga represented something profoundly threatening to colonial order: unapologetic African defiance.

Modern Trinidad contains only limited physical reminders of Daaga's existence. A few street names and local references survive, but there is no grand national memorial equivalent to those dedicated to celebrated independence leaders or labour activists.

This absence should provoke reflection. Monuments are not neutral objects. They reveal what societies choose to honour public-

ly. When certain figures remain unmemorialised, it often reflects broader discomfort about the histories they represent.

Daaga's relative invisibility mirrors wider patterns across the Caribbean, where the contributions of enslaved Africans to freedom struggles are frequently acknowledged rhetorically yet insufficiently embedded within public infrastructure and education.

The issue is not simply about erecting statues. It concerns historical consciousness itself. A society that neglects its resistance traditions risks misunderstanding the foundations of its own freedoms.

Moreover, Daaga's story possesses contemporary relevance precisely because it transcends national boundaries. He belonged to the wider Atlantic world of African displacement and resistance. His life connected West Africa, the Caribbean, and the violent economic systems of empire. In that sense, he should be understood not merely as a Trinidadian figure but as a Pan-African martyr.

Recovering Daaga's legacy requires more than symbolic gestures. It demands serious historical engagement. Schools, universities, museums and cultural institutions across the Caribbean should invest greater attention in lesser-known resistance figures whose stories challenge simplified narratives of emancipation.

There is also scope for artistic revival. Caribbean literature, theatre, and film have long played crucial roles in reclaiming suppressed histories. A major historical novel or cinematic portrayal of Daaga could introduce his story to audiences far beyond Trinidad.

Importantly, reclaiming Daaga does not diminish better-known heroes such as Tacky or Sam Sharpe. Rather, it enriches understanding of the broader landscape of Black resistance throughout the Atlantic world. Freedom was not won through isolated acts of

heroism. It emerged from countless struggles, many of them undocumented, localised, or forgotten.

The tendency to focus exclusively on a few canonical figures risks oversimplifying the complexity of anti-slavery resistance. Daaga reminds us that history contains many buried lives whose significance exceeds the attention they received.

Daaga occupies a haunting place within Caribbean history: remembered yet neglected, present yet peripheral. His obscurity is not evidence of insignificance. On the contrary, it reflects the selective mechanisms through which societies construct historical memory.

He stands as a symbol of those African rebels whose sacrifices were absorbed into the foundations of freedom but whose names never achieved full recognition. Oral traditions preserved fragments of his legacy when official history would not. Those fragments deserve expansion, not silence.

In an age increasingly concerned with confronting colonial legacies and recovering suppressed voices, Daaga should no longer remain hidden in the shadows of Caribbean memory. Trinidad and indeed the wider African diaspora, possesses in him a figure worthy of deeper honour.

History owes him more than a street sign. ■

From mutiny to the Morant Bay rebellion

How 1837 foreshadowed later colonial military uprisings

History rarely unfolds in isolation. Empires often convince themselves that rebellions are local disturbances, caused by temporary grievances or unruly personalities. Yet, when one examines the great military and social upheavals of the colonial world, patterns emerge with striking consistency. Among the most overlooked of these patterns is the danger posed by trained but marginalised former soldiers, men who had served imperial systems, learned discipline and violence within them and were later abandoned by the very authorities they once defended.

The 1837 St. Joseph Mutiny in Trinidad stands as one of the earliest and clearest warnings of this phenomenon. Though often overshadowed by larger uprisings elsewhere in the British Empire, it revealed a recurring colonial contradiction: empires depended upon local military manpower for stability, yet feared the political consequences of empowering colonised men with military training, organisational skills and expectations of reward or recognition.

The mutiny foreshadowed not only the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica, but also the military uprisings that shook newly independent African nations in the 1960s. Across these different centuries and regions, the same combustible ingredients reappeared, economic deprivation, racial inequality, broken promises, and former soldiers who no longer accepted submission.

The lesson was never fully learned.

The British Empire relied heavily on locally recruited troops. From the Caribbean to West Africa and India, imperial administrators recognised a practical truth, tropical colonies could not be held by British troops alone. Local regiments were cheaper, more adaptable to climate, and often more familiar with terrain and local populations.

Yet the colonial soldier occupied an uneasy position. He was simultaneously valued and feared.

Military service introduced colonised men to ideas that colonial authorities preferred to suppress. Soldiers learned organisation, discipline, chain of command and the practical realities of power. They became familiar with weapons, logistics, and communication systems. Many also developed heightened expectations of citizenship, status, or economic mobility.

When these expectations were denied, the results could be explosive.

The British Empire consistently underestimated the political consciousness of men it had militarised. Colonial authorities often viewed mutinies merely as breaches of discipline rather than symptoms of structural injustice. This blindness would haunt imperial governance for generations.

The St. Joseph Mutiny emerged during a period of immense transition within the Caribbean colonies. Slavery had formally been abolished in the British Empire in 1833, though the apprenticeship system delayed genuine emancipation. Colonial society was tense, unstable, and economically uncertain.

In Trinidad, the social order remained deeply militarised. Free Black men and formerly enslaved individuals had long served in colonial militias and West India Regiments. Many expected that military service would lead to greater recognition and security within the new post-slavery order.

Instead, they encountered marginalisation.

The mutiny at St. Joseph reflected frustrations that extended far beyond barracks discipline. Former soldiers and militia members

faced shrinking opportunities, racial discrimination, poor treatment, and fears of social exclusion within a colony attempting to preserve white planter dominance after emancipation.

Colonial authorities interpreted unrest through the narrow lens of security. They saw dangerous agitators rather than politically aware veterans reacting to betrayal. Yet the mutiny revealed something crucial: military experience could transform social grievances into organised resistance.

The participants were not an undisciplined mob. They understood tactics, command structures, and the symbolic importance of armed resistance. Even when the uprising failed, it demonstrated how former colonial troops could become revolutionary actors once imperial legitimacy collapsed in their eyes.

This pattern would repeat itself again and again across the empire.

The decades after slavery's abolition were marked by profound disappointment across the Caribbean. Emancipation did not produce economic justice or political inclusion. Plantation elites retained enormous power, while freed populations struggled with landlessness, poverty, and coercive labour systems.

Former soldiers occupied a particularly volatile social position within this environment.

Military veterans had often internalised imperial rhetoric about loyalty and service. Many genuinely believed their contributions to colonial defence entitled them to greater rights or opportunities. Instead, they encountered the same racial hierarchies that governed wider colonial society.

This sense of betrayal proved politically dangerous.

A man trained to obey authority may remain loyal while he believes the system possesses legitimacy. Once that belief evaporates, however, military discipline can easily become military resistance. Colonial governments repeatedly failed to understand this transformation.

Rather than integrating veterans into stable economic and political structures, imperial authorities frequently demobilised them into unemployment and social exclusion. In doing so, they created populations with both grievances and the practical capacity for organised violence.

By the time the Morant Bay Rebellion erupted in Jamaica in 1865, the social tensions evident in Trinidad decades earlier had intensified across the Caribbean.

Jamaica after emancipation remained a profoundly unequal society. Freed Black Jamaicans faced crushing poverty, limited access to land, discriminatory courts, and political exclusion. Economic hardship deepened during the 1860s as falling sugar prices destabilised the colony.

The rebellion led by Paul Bogle was not merely a spontaneous riot. It emerged from years of frustration and institutional failure. Protesters marched with political purpose, demanding justice and recognition from a colonial system that had systematically denied both.

Former soldiers and militia-trained men played important roles in the uprising and in the wider atmosphere of resistance. The British authorities recognised this danger immediately. Their response was extraordinarily brutal precisely because they feared organised insurrection rather than isolated disorder.

Governor Edward John Eyre responded with martial law, mass executions, floggings, and widespread repression. Hundreds were killed.

Yet beneath the violence lay the same imperial anxiety first visible in earlier mutinies such as St. Joseph: what happens when men trained within colonial military systems turn against colonial authority?

The Morant Bay Rebellion demonstrated that post-emancipation unrest could not simply be suppressed through force alone. Economic injustice and racial exclusion had created conditions in which resistance became rational to many of the colonised.

Britain's reaction also exposed the limits of imperial liberalism. The empire celebrated abolition and civilisation in theory, but resorted to terror when confronted with demands for meaningful equality.

One of the most persistent misunderstandings in imperial governance was the belief that disarmament neutralised military threats.

Colonial authorities often assumed that once weapons were confiscated or regiments dissolved, danger disappeared. In reality, military training itself was transformative. Men who had served in organised armed structures rarely returned unchanged to civilian life.

Former soldiers retained more than technical skills. They carried altered perceptions of authority, hierarchy, and collective action.

Many had travelled beyond their local communities. They had witnessed administrative weaknesses within imperial systems. They understood that colonial power depended heavily upon intimidation and perception rather than unlimited force.

Most importantly, they had learned the value of coordination.

A starving labourer may revolt spontaneously. A former soldier can organise revolt strategically.

This distinction explains why colonial governments so often feared veterans even after demobilisation. Across the empire, authorities monitored ex-servicemen closely, suspecting that they could become centres of political mobilisation.

The end of formal empire did not eliminate these dynamics. In many newly independent African states during the 1960s, military mutinies erupted with startling frequency.

These uprisings were frequently interpreted as evidence that post-colonial governments were unstable or unprepared for self-

rule. Such interpretations ignored the colonial origins of the problem.

European empires had created military institutions designed for control rather than national cohesion. Colonial armies were often ethnically divided, politically manipulated, and economically neglected. African soldiers served imperial interests for decades but were rarely prepared for meaningful participation in democratic governance after independence.

When independence arrived, expectations rose dramatically. Soldiers anticipated improved pay, promotions, national respect, and social mobility. Instead, many encountered continued inequality, corruption, or exclusion under new ruling elites.

The mutinies that followed in countries such as Congo, Uganda, and Tanzania reflected the same structural tensions visible in St. Joseph and Morant Bay.

Again, militarised men felt abandoned by political systems that depended upon them.

Again, governments underestimated the political consciousness of trained soldiers.

Again, discontented veterans and serving troops became revolutionary actors.

The 1964 mutinies in East Africa were particularly revealing. Soldiers demanded better conditions, Africanisation of officer ranks, and recognition after independence. Many believed political leaders had merely replaced colonial rulers without transforming the underlying structures of inequality.

The rhetoric had changed; the frustrations had not.

At the heart of these uprisings lies a contradiction that plagued colonial systems from beginning to end.

Empires required local military participation to survive. Yet by training colonised populations in warfare and administration, they unintentionally created future challengers to imperial authority.

Military service fostered expectations that colonial societies could not accommodate without undermining racial hierarchy itself.

A soldier asked to defend empire naturally begins to question why he remains excluded from its privileges.

This contradiction was especially dangerous after periods of transition, emancipation in the Caribbean, decolonisation in Africa, or economic crisis anywhere within imperial systems. Expectations rose faster than political reform, producing anger among those most capable of organised resistance.

The British Empire repeatedly treated such unrest as criminality rather than political communication. Mutineers were labelled disloyal, savage, or manipulated by agitators. Yet these explanations ignored the deeper structural reality, empire itself generated the conditions for revolt.

Colonial authorities feared not merely weapons, but consciousness.

The truly dangerous figure was not the armed rebel alone, but the politically awakened veteran who understood both the strengths and vulnerabilities of imperial power.

This explains why colonial governments often sought to fragment military communities after service ended. Veterans were denied land, dispersed geographically, or excluded from political influence.

Authorities recognised the potential threat posed by concentrated groups of trained, disillusioned men.

Yet repression frequently intensified resentment rather than eliminating it.

The St. Joseph Mutiny, Morant Bay Rebellion, and African mutinies all reveal how military experience could evolve into political radicalisation when combined with economic exclusion and racial injustice.

These uprisings were not historical accidents. They were predictable outcomes of systems built upon inequality.

The relationship between military service and political instability did not end with decolonisation. Modern states continue to confront similar challenges when veterans feel abandoned or excluded after service.

Across the world, former soldiers often occupy ambiguous positions within society. They possess organisational skills, networks, and combat experience, yet may struggle economically or psychologically after demobilisation. Where governments fail to integrate veterans effectively, instability can follow.

The colonial experience offers an especially stark warning because imperial systems repeatedly ignored this lesson despite centuries of evidence.

The St. Joseph Mutiny of 1837 was not an isolated Caribbean disturbance. It was an early signal of a recurring historical reality: states that train men for violence cannot assume permanent loyalty when those same men are denied dignity, equality, or opportunity.

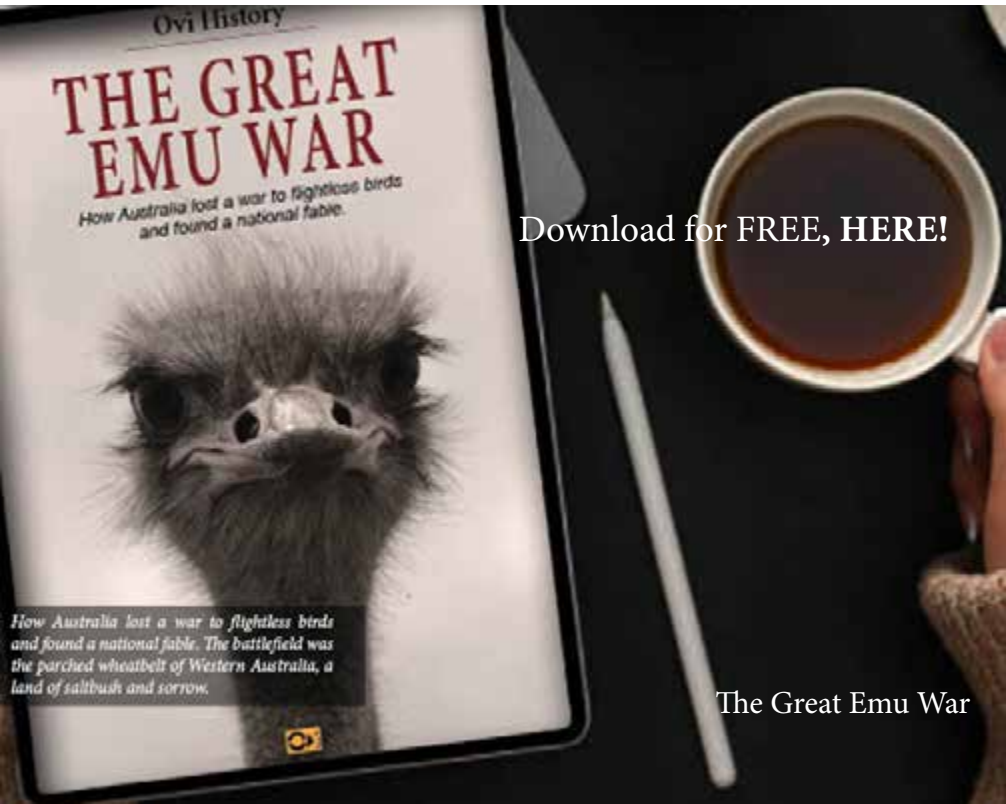
Morant Bay confirmed the warning.

The African mutinies of the 1960s confirmed it again.

History suggests that disarmed soldiers are never truly powerless. Training alters expectations, identity, and political awareness. When societies fail to recognise this transformation, they risk turning former defenders into future rebels.

Empires learned this lesson too late.

Some modern states may still be learning it now. ■


Ovi History
THE GREAT EMU WAR
How Australia lost a war to flightless birds and found a national fable.
How Australia lost a war to flightless birds and found a national fable. The battlefield was the parched wheatbelt of Western Australia, a land of saltbush and sorrow.
Download for FREE, HERE!
The Great Emu War

What happens when you arm the oppressed?
The Military's 'Loyalty Paradox'

States have always depended upon a dangerous bargain. They recruit the poor, the marginalised, the colonised and the excluded into armies designed to preserve an existing order, often an order that disadvantages those very recruits. Most of the time the arrangement works. Discipline, pay, status, fear and national mythology combine to produce loyalty strong enough to sustain empires and republics alike.

But history repeatedly demonstrates a paradox at the heart of military power: once oppressed groups are armed, organised and politically awakened, the same institutions intended to secure state authority can become vehicles for rebellion, liberation or fragmentation.

This is the military's loyalty paradox. Arm the excluded long enough, and eventually they may begin asking whom the weapons truly serve.

The modern world is filled with examples. Colonial troops fought for empires they later dismantled. Ethnic militias empowered by governments became

autonomous political actors. Minority forces used as instruments of state survival later pursued national projects of their own. The lesson is neither simple nor comforting. Marginalised soldiers are not inherently disloyal, nor are states wrong to integrate minorities into their armed forces. Quite the opposite: inclusive militaries can stabilise societies and deepen citizenship.

Yet the paradox emerges whenever a state demands sacrifice without offering dignity, equality or political belonging in return.

The issue is not merely military. It is moral, social and historical.

Empires frequently recruited from populations they considered "martial", hardy or politically expendable. The practice was ancient, but the modern imperial age refined it into a science.

The Indian Rebellion of 1857 profoundly shaped British military thinking. After the uprising, known in Britain for generations as the "Indian Mutiny" the British Crown lost faith in certain communities while elevating others deemed more loyal. Recruitment increasingly favoured Sikhs, Gurkhas and Punjabi Muslims. Colonial ideology transformed ethnicity into military doctrine.

The British Empire relied heavily on colonial manpower during both world wars. Indian soldiers fought and died from Flanders to North Africa. African regiments defended imperial interests across continents. France did much the same with North African and West African troops. These soldiers were praised for bravery while simultaneously denied equality within the imperial structure they defended.

The contradiction could not last indefinitely.

Military service changes people. It exposes them to political ideas, develops organisational skills and teaches collective action. Soldiers

who survive war return home with altered expectations. Men who fought for "freedom" abroad often demanded it at home.

The aftermath of the Second World War accelerated decolonisation partly because colonial troops had become politically conscious. Veterans had seen European vulnerability with their own eyes. The myth of imperial invincibility died in the deserts of Libya, the jungles of Burma and the ruins of Singapore.

The empire had armed its subjects and unintentionally educated them.

Perhaps no example illustrates the loyalty paradox more painfully than Algerian War.

France recruited thousands of Muslim Algerians into auxiliary and regular forces during the war against the National Liberation Front (FLN). Many Algerians fought loyally for France, motivated by local rivalries, economic necessity, fear of FLN reprisals or genuine belief in French identity.

But France's political failure proved decisive. The republic demanded military loyalty while withholding full equality and legitimacy from much of the Muslim population. Even reforms arrived too late and appeared insincere.

As the war intensified, loyalty became increasingly fragile. Some Algerian troops defected. Others remained loyal until the bitter end, only to discover that France itself would eventually abandon them after Algerian independence.

The tragedy of the Harkis, Muslim Algerians who fought alongside French forces, remains one of the darkest episodes of modern French history. Thousands were massacred after independence, while many survivors who fled to France faced discrimination and neglect.

The lesson was brutal: regimes that rely upon marginalised military allies without building lasting political inclusion create disposable loyalties rather than durable citizenship.

The Soviet Union maintained one of the largest multi-ethnic military systems in history. Moscow depended upon recruits from across Central Asia, the Caucasus, Ukraine and the Baltic republics.

For decades the Soviet military appeared remarkably stable despite deep ethnic tensions. The state's ideological structure, communism, Soviet patriotism and centralised coercion, held the system together.

Until it did not.

Once political legitimacy weakened during the 1980s, national identity rapidly overtook Soviet identity. Ethnic grievances that had been suppressed within the military resurfaced with force. Armenian and Azerbaijani tensions exploded. Baltic republics resisted Moscow openly. Ukrainian nationalism intensified.

The Soviet armed forces suddenly faced a crisis fundamental to all multinational states: what happens when soldiers no longer agree on the nation they are defending?

By the collapse of the USSR in 1991, units fragmented along national lines. Weapons, training and military infrastructure flowed into newly independent republics. The Soviet state had created the military foundations of its successor states long before it realised the union itself might dissolve.

Again, the paradox emerged. The centre armed the periphery in order to strengthen unity. In time, that same process enabled separation.

The United States presents a more complicated version of the paradox because it eventually transformed military service into a pathway towards expanded citizenship.

African Americans served in segregated units for generations despite systemic racism at home. During World War II, Black soldiers fought fascism abroad while enduring discrimination within the US military itself.

The hypocrisy became increasingly impossible to justify.

The "Double V" campaign, victory against fascism overseas and racism at home, reflected a growing recognition that military sacrifice created moral claims upon the state. Service members who risked their lives for national ideals expected those ideals to apply to them as well.

Importantly, the United States partially resolved the loyalty paradox through reform rather than repression. President Harry S. Truman ordered military desegregation in 1948. The process was

uneven and incomplete, but it marked a crucial shift: inclusion became a strategic necessity.

This is an underappreciated historical truth. States reduce the danger of military fragmentation not by excluding minorities, but by genuinely integrating them into the political community.

A soldier who believes he belongs is less likely to seek an alternative nation.

The modern Middle East offers perhaps the clearest contemporary expression of the loyalty paradox.

For decades Kurdish populations across Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran faced varying degrees of repression, exclusion or denied national identity. Yet Kurdish fighters repeatedly became indispensable military partners for regional states and foreign powers alike.

The rise of the Islamic State transformed Kurdish militias into internationally recognised military actors. Forces such as the YPG in Syria and the Peshmerga in Iraq proved highly effective against jihadist forces.

But military empowerment inevitably strengthened Kurdish political aspirations.

This should not have surprised anyone. Military organisation creates leadership networks, territorial control, administrative capacity and collective identity. Armed movements rarely remain purely tactical instruments forever.

Turkey's long conflict with Kurdish insurgents demonstrates how quickly the line between state auxiliary and existential threat can blur. Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government evolved from a fragile

autonomous zone into a semi-state entity with its own security institutions and diplomatic leverage.

The paradox is stark. Governments often empower minority militias because they need immediate security solutions. Yet every battlefield victory can deepen the long-term political confidence of the armed group itself.

Military loyalty rarely collapses suddenly. It erodes gradually through accumulated contradictions.

Three factors appear repeatedly throughout history.

First: unequal sacrifice

Marginalised communities will often tolerate exclusion temporarily if military service offers advancement, protection or status. But when casualties mount without political improvement, resentment deepens.

A state asking citizens to die for ideals it refuses to honour creates moral instability within its own ranks.

Second: competing identities

National identity must usually overpower ethnic, religious or regional identity for military cohesion to endure. This requires more than propaganda. It requires credible inclusion.

Where minority groups experience persistent discrimination, alternative loyalties remain powerful beneath the surface.

Third: loss of regime legitimacy

Oppressed groups often remain loyal longer than elites expect. But once the state itself appears weak, corrupt or morally bankrupt, military cohesion can unravel with astonishing speed.

The decisive question becomes simple: why defend a system that refuses to defend you?

Modern governments frequently assume professionalization solves the loyalty paradox. Better training, modern equipment and institutional discipline supposedly produce politically neutral soldiers.

History suggests otherwise.

Armies are never separate from society. Soldiers carry identities, grievances and aspirations into uniform with them. Professionalism may delay fragmentation, but it cannot erase social reality indefinitely.

Indeed, heavily professionalised minority forces can become even more politically influential because they possess organisational sophistication alongside collective identity.

This is why states often oscillate between empowering and fearing minority troops. The same Kurdish fighter, colonial regiment or ethnic battalion can appear either heroic or dangerous depending upon political circumstances.

Yesterday's indispensable ally can become tomorrow's separatist threat.

The loyalty paradox does not mean governments should avoid recruiting marginalised groups. Exclusion is often even more destabilising. A military dominated by a narrow ethnic or social elite becomes detached from society and prone to repression or coups.

The real lesson is more difficult.

Military inclusion without political inclusion is ultimately unstable.

A state cannot permanently ask communities to fight for systems that deny them dignity, representation or equality. Weapons alone do not create rebellion. Humiliation does.

Where governments succeed is where military service becomes part of a broader social contract. Shared sacrifice must produce shared belonging. Citizenship must mean something tangible.

This remains deeply relevant today. Multi-ethnic states across the world continue balancing security needs against unresolved identity conflicts. Governments still rely upon minority militias, regional forces and historically excluded populations to maintain order or fight insurgencies.

Some will learn the correct lesson from history: loyalty grows through justice.

Others will repeat the older imperial assumption that disciplined force can indefinitely suppress political contradiction.

History offers little evidence for that belief.

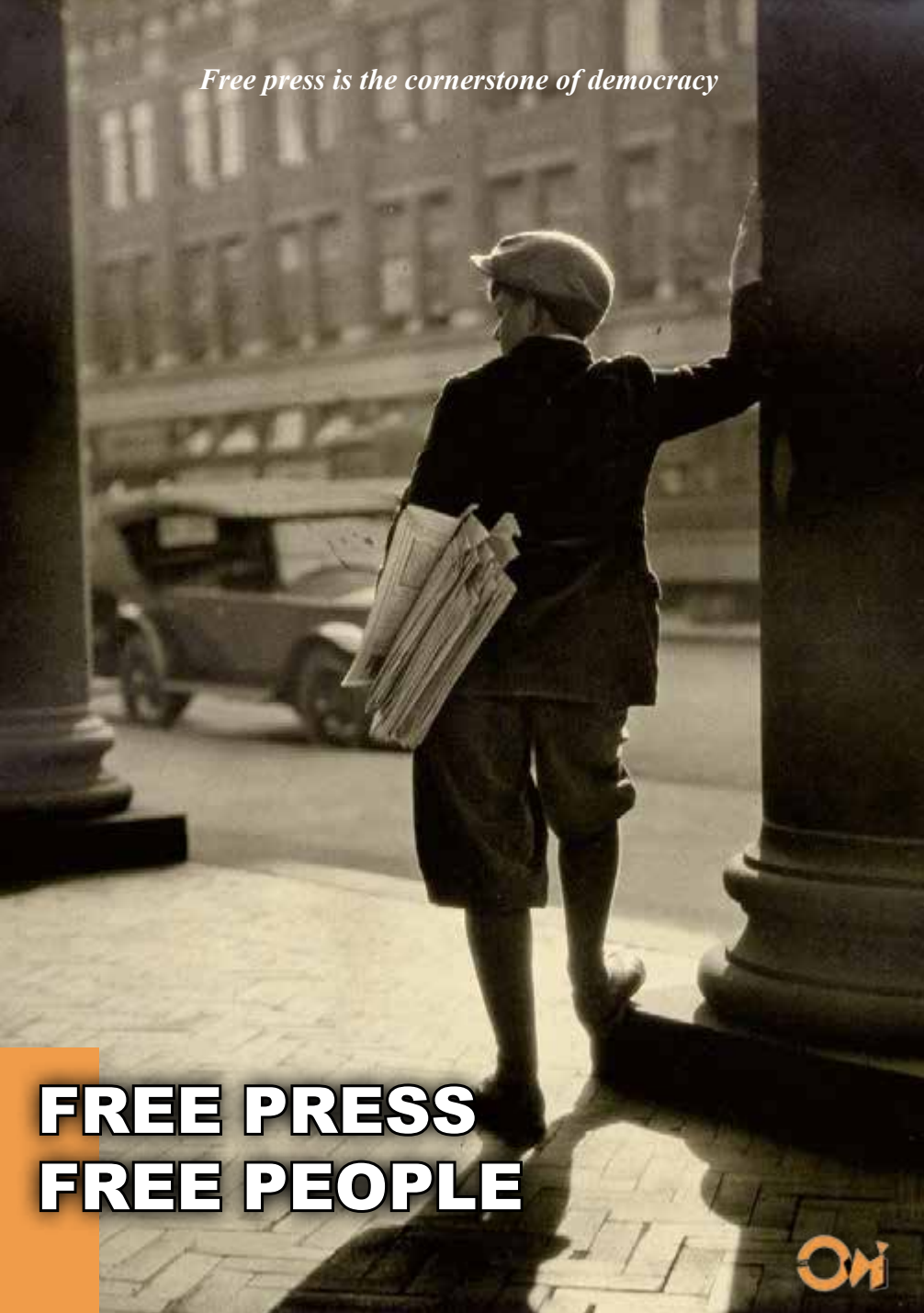
The military loyalty paradox reveals something fundamental about power. States often believe weapons flow in one direction: from ruler to soldier, from centre to periphery. But military service transforms both sides.

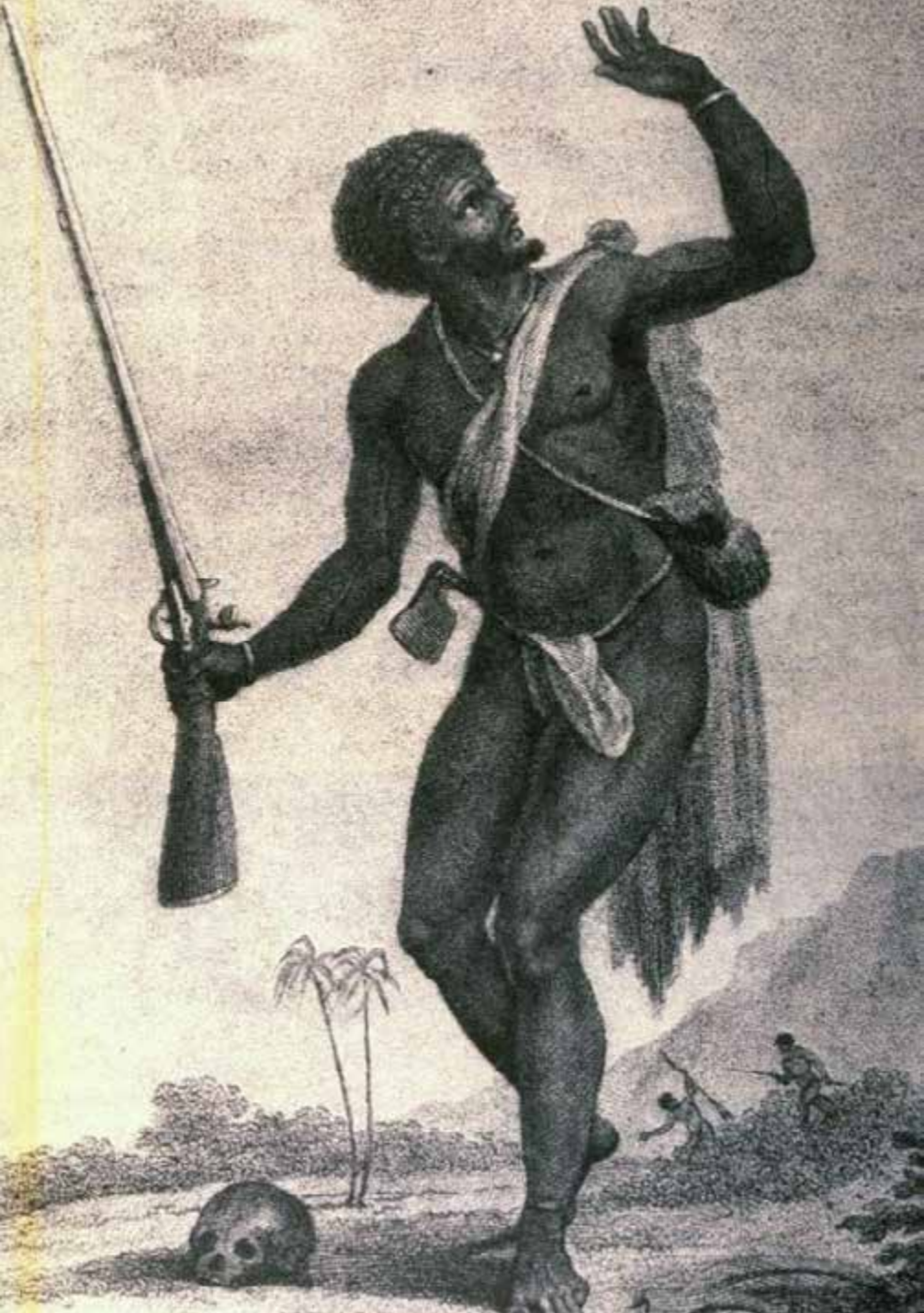
The oppressed who are armed do not merely become stronger militarily. They become organised, conscious and politically consequential. They begin to imagine futures beyond obedience.

Sometimes this strengthens nations through inclusion and reform. Sometimes it fractures them through rebellion and separatism. Much depends on whether the state recognises the humanity of those it asks to fight in its name.

Empires ignored this lesson repeatedly. Modern states still struggle with it today.

An army can enforce authority for a time. But no state can rely forever on the loyalty of people it refuses to fully accept. ■


Free press is the cornerstone of democracy
FREE PRESS
FREE PEOPLE



Repatriation as resistance

Why 'going home' remains a radical political demand

History rarely treats the desire to return home as a neutral act. More often, empires, slave societies and modern nation-states have interpreted repatriation not as a human longing but as a political threat. The enslaved African who dreamt of Africa, the colonised subject who rejected imperial citizenship, the refugee demanding the right to return or the migrant refusing forced assimilation, all have encountered the same suspicion, why would anyone wish to leave the system unless they rejected its legitimacy?

This question lies at the heart of the story of Daaga, whose failed attempt to return to Africa illuminates a much larger historical truth. Across centuries, "going home" has functioned as one of the most radical political demands imaginable. It challenges ownership, borders, labour systems and imperial authority. It exposes the uncomfortable reality that oppressed people may not seek inclusion within unjust systems at all, they may instead seek escape from them.

The history of repatriation is therefore not simply about migration. It is about resistance.

Daaga's story emerged from the brutal machinery of the Atlantic slave trade. Torn from Africa and transported into a colonial system designed to erase identity, language and memory, he nevertheless retained one dangerous idea, Africa remained home.

That idea alone threatened the logic of slavery.

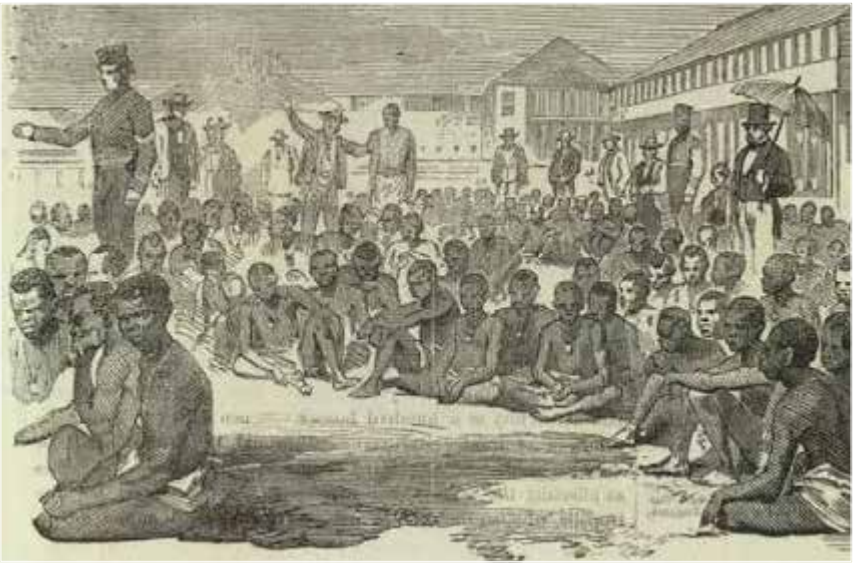
Slave systems depended not merely upon forced labour but upon psychological transformation. Enslaved Africans were expected to become permanent property within colonial economies. Their descendants would inherit bondage, while Africa itself would fade into abstraction, a distant place stripped of political meaning.

But Daaga's longing disrupted this process. His desire to return was not nostalgia; it was refusal. To seek repatriation was to reject the slaveholder's claim to ownership. It was to insist that captivity could never become legitimacy.

This explains why colonial authorities consistently viewed African memory as subversive. Drumming, spiritual traditions, African languages and collective remembrance were often criminalised because they maintained a connection to another world beyond plantation rule. Repatriation was feared not because it was impractical but because it undermined the ideological foundation of empire itself.

The enslaved person who imagined Africa could also imagine freedom.

Modern political systems often celebrate freedom of movement in theory while fearing it in practice. Empires especially depended



upon controlling not only labour but belonging. Colonial powers wanted subjects who would remain economically productive while accepting imperial authority as permanent.

This is why large-scale return movements repeatedly alarmed colonial governments.

During the nineteenth century, the establishment of Liberia became entangled in contradictory political visions. For some formerly enslaved African Americans, Liberia represented hope: a place where Black people could govern themselves outside white supremacy. For others, the project reflected American racial anxieties, particularly among white elites who preferred Black emigration to racial equality.

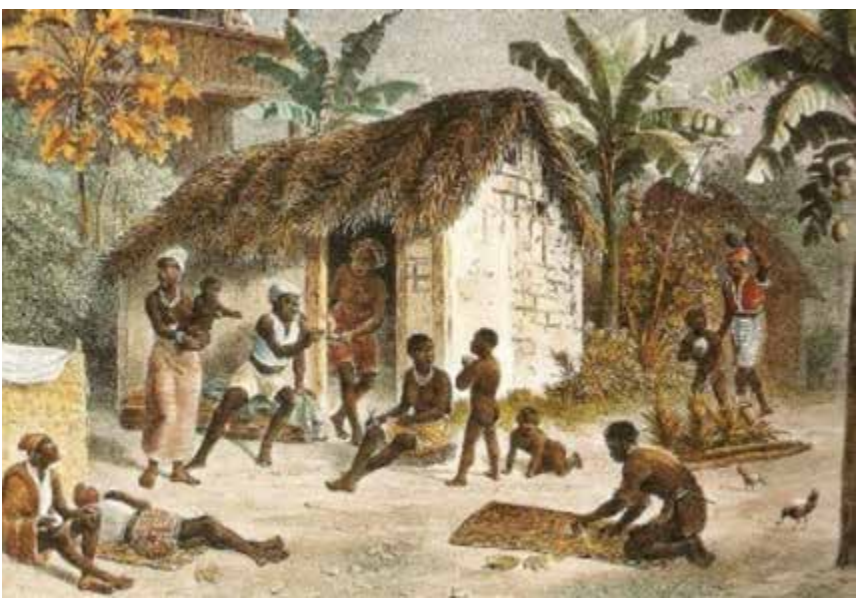
The ambiguity of Liberia reveals an enduring tension within repatriation politics. Is return liberation, exile, compromise or survival? Often it is all four at once.

Yet what mattered politically was the symbolic challenge. Black repatriation movements exposed the hypocrisy of societies claiming universal liberty while denying equality to millions. If citizens sought dignity elsewhere, what did that say about the nations they left behind?

The question remains deeply uncomfortable even today.

No figure understood the revolutionary potential of repatriation more clearly than Marcus Garvey. Through the Universal Negro Improvement Association, Garvey transformed the dream of African return into a global political movement.

To critics, Garvey's "Back-to-Africa" campaign seemed unrealistic, romantic or theatrical. But dismissing it on logistical grounds misses its deeper significance. Garveyism was powerful precisely because it rejected the assumption that Black people must endlessly plead for acceptance within racist societies.



Garvey understood that racial hierarchy relied psychologically upon permanence. White supremacist systems assumed Black populations would remain economically dependent and politically subordinate. The idea that millions might instead build autonomous futures elsewhere disrupted that certainty.

Garvey's famous shipping venture, the Black Star Line, mattered even in failure. The ships symbolised mobility, agency and collective self-determination. Control over movement meant control over destiny.

This is why governments across the Atlantic monitored, harassed and ultimately undermined Garvey's movement. Officials recognised what many historians later softened, repatriation was not merely migration policy. It was anti-colonial rebellion.

Modern states frequently present citizenship as a consensual relationship, yet they often react defensively when people attempt to leave permanently, especially in politically meaningful ways.

The refugee seeking return to ancestral land, the indigenous community demanding territorial restoration, or the diaspora population reclaiming historical belonging all expose the fragility of national myths. Their movements suggest that present borders may rest upon unresolved violence.

Consider contemporary debates surrounding displaced populations across the world. The "right of return" remains one of the most contested concepts in international politics because it threatens existing demographic and territorial arrangements. Repatriation claims force governments to confront historical accountability.

This is why repatriation is often reframed as destabilisation.

A refugee demanding return may be described as a security threat. A migrant rejecting assimilation may be labelled disloyal. Diaspora movements advocating reconnection with ancestral homelands are accused of divided loyalties. Again and again, the desire to belong elsewhere becomes politically suspicious.

The irony is striking. Liberal democracies routinely celebrate freedom itself while treating one of freedom's clearest expressions, the right to leave oppressive conditions, as inherently dangerous.

Modern refugee policy reveals another contradiction. Wealthy nations often support temporary protection while resisting permanent repatriation rights.

Refugees are expected to survive displacement but not necessarily overcome it.

International institutions frequently discuss refugees in administrative terms: quotas, processing systems, integration strategies and border management. Yet displaced people themselves often speak a different language, one of memory, land and return.

To many policymakers, such desires appear inconvenient or unrealistic. But history suggests otherwise. Human beings rarely surrender attachment to homeland simply because political systems demand adaptation.

The twentieth century repeatedly demonstrated this truth. From post-war Europe to post-colonial Africa and the Middle East, displaced communities preserved identities across generations precisely because exile remained psychologically unfinished.

This persistence is often misunderstood as irrational nationalism. In reality, it may represent resistance against forced historical erasure.

"Going home" is not always literal. For diasporic communities, repatriation can also mean cultural restoration, historical recovery and psychological decolonisation.

The modern revival of African spiritual traditions across the diaspora reflects this broader form of return. So too does the growing interest in genealogy, indigenous languages and ancestral history among communities shaped by slavery and colonial displacement.

These movements are politically significant because they reject assimilation as the only acceptable endpoint of migration or oppression. They insist that survival does not require forgetting.

This helps explain why dominant cultures sometimes mock or trivialise such efforts. The rediscovery of ancestral identity unsettles national narratives built upon absorption and conformity. Reconnection implies that displacement was never entirely complete.

Daaga's longing therefore survives far beyond his historical moment. His failed voyage symbolises an enduring refusal to allow oppressive systems to define belonging permanently.

In United Kingdom, discussions of migration often focus narrowly upon borders and economics while avoiding deeper imperial histories. Yet many diasporic communities within Britain exist precisely because empire moved people through coercion, extraction and unequal citizenship structures.

The descendants of colonised peoples are frequently asked to prove loyalty to Britain while their own histories of displacement remain marginalised. Meanwhile, expressions of diasporic attachment elsewhere may attract suspicion.

This reveals a broader imperial legacy: empires encouraged movement when it served labour demands but resisted autonomous mobility when it empowered colonised people themselves.

The Windrush generation travelled to Britain as imperial citizens, invited to rebuild the country after war. Yet decades later, many faced bureaucratic hostility questioning whether they truly belonged. The message was unmistakable: movement under empire had been permitted, but belonging remained conditional.

Against this backdrop, the idea of repatriation, whether literal or symbolic, acquires renewed political force.

The demand to return home continues to resonate because it speaks to one of humanity's most basic political instincts: the refusal to normalise injustice.

Daaga's dream of Africa was radical because it denied the plantation's moral authority. Garvey's ships were radical because they imagined Black futures beyond white domination. Refugees

insisting upon return remain radical because they challenge the permanence of displacement itself.

Power prefers narratives of adaptation. Oppressive systems function more smoothly when people adjust, integrate and forget. Repatriation interrupts that process. It declares that exile is not necessarily acceptable merely because it has become normal.

This does not mean all return movements are uncomplicated or inherently virtuous. History offers examples of exclusionary nationalism and romanticised homeland politics. Yet dismissing repatriation entirely risks ignoring the legitimate human desire for historical continuity, dignity and self-determination.

The deeper issue is not whether every return is practical. It is whether oppressed people possess the moral right to imagine life outside systems that diminish them.

For centuries, authorities have answered that question with anxiety, repression or ridicule. That reaction alone reveals how politically powerful the idea remains.

To say "I want to go home" is sometimes far more revolutionary than demanding reform. It is to announce that the existing order has failed so completely that departure itself becomes an act of resistance. ■

Daaga's legacy in contemporary immigration

Few figures in Caribbean history embody the contradictions of empire, resistance, identity, and displacement as powerfully as Daaga. Though not as internationally recognised as Toussaint Louverture or Marcus Garvey, Daaga's story resonates deeply in contemporary debates surrounding immigration, belonging, citizenship, and post-colonial identity. His rebellion in nineteenth-century Trinidad was not merely an isolated act of defiance against slavery; it represented a wider human struggle against systems that denied movement, autonomy, dignity and cultural identity.

Today, as Europe wrestles with immigration crises, border enforcement, multicultural tensions, and the political weaponisation of migration, Daaga's legacy feels remarkably modern. His life forces Britain and the wider Western world to confront uncomfortable historical truths: modern migration patterns did not emerge in a vacuum. They are rooted in centuries of imperial expansion, forced displacement, labour exploitation, and racial hierarchy, systems from which Britain benefited enormously.

To understand Daaga's relevance to immigration today, one must move beyond simplistic historical celebration. His legacy is not merely inspirational; it is accusatory. It asks difficult questions about who has the right to move, who gets labelled "civilised" or "foreign", and whether former imperial powers genuinely understand the consequences of their own history.

Daaga, believed to have been of West African origin and associated with the Mandinka people, arrived in Trinidad through the machinery of the transatlantic slave trade. He did not migrate voluntarily. He was transported as property within an imperial economic system designed to enrich colonial powers. His very presence in the Caribbean was the result of forced migration on an industrial scale.

Modern immigration debates often ignore this foundational truth: Britain helped create the global conditions that displaced millions of people across continents. The empire moved populations constantly, Africans through slavery, Indians through indentured labour, Chinese labourers across colonial territories and Europeans into conquered lands. Migration was not accidental to empire; it was essential to it.

This historical reality matters because contemporary political rhetoric in Britain frequently frames immigration as an external pressure imposed upon an otherwise stable national identity. Yet Britain's wealth, institutions, language, and global influence were constructed through centuries of international movement, coercion, and colonial integration.

Daaga's rebellion in 1837 came at a pivotal moment. Slavery had officially been abolished within the British Empire in 1834, but "apprenticeship" systems continued to exploit formerly enslaved people. Freedom existed on paper more than in practice. Daaga

recognised what many oppressed people throughout history have understood: legal reform without structural justice changes little.

That lesson remains relevant today.

One of the most striking aspects of modern British immigration debates is historical amnesia. Politicians frequently discuss migrants as though Britain developed independently from the regions from which many migrants now originate. In reality, migration from the Caribbean, South Asia, and Africa is inseparable from Britain's imperial history.

The descendants of colonial subjects often migrated to Britain not because Britain was foreign to them, but because Britain had already inserted itself into their societies politically, economically, and culturally.

This is where Daaga's symbolic importance becomes significant. He represents one of countless individuals whose lives were shaped entirely by imperial mobility imposed from above. His descendants, culturally if not biologically, are part of the same historical continuum that later produced the Windrush scandal and contemporary disputes over asylum seekers and migration policy.

The irony is stark. Britain once transported millions across oceans to sustain imperial commerce. Today, some descendants of those displaced populations are treated as intruders when they seek opportunity or refuge within Britain itself.

Daaga's story exposes the moral inconsistency at the heart of selective historical memory. Empire encouraged unrestricted movement when it served profit and power; modern nationalism often condemns movement when undertaken by the descendants of the exploited.

Daaga's rebellion terrified colonial authorities not merely because of the violence involved, but because it challenged the racial order underpinning imperial society. Colonial administrators feared collective resistance among displaced populations. That fear has modern echoes.

Contemporary immigration politics across Europe frequently rely upon anxiety: fear of demographic change, fear of cultural erosion, fear of economic competition, and fear of insecurity. Migrants are often portrayed as destabilising forces threatening national cohesion.

Yet historically, displaced populations have often been responding to instability created by larger geopolitical forces — wars, economic extraction, climate crises, and international inequalities frequently linked to colonial legacies.

Daaga himself was once viewed by authorities as dangerous because he refused passive assimilation into an unjust system.

In many ways, this mirrors modern suspicion directed towards migrant communities perceived as insufficiently integrated or politically assertive.

There is a recurring historical pattern in how states respond to marginalised outsiders:

- first through exploitation,
- then through containment,
- finally through suspicion when those populations demand equality.

This pattern appeared under colonialism and persists in subtler forms today.

Modern discourse often treats migrants as statistics rather than historical actors. Debates focus on numbers, border crossings, and economic costs while neglecting human stories shaped by global history.

Daaga's life reminds us that migration is rarely a simple personal choice detached from political context. Whether forced by slavery, driven by poverty, or compelled by conflict, migration is frequently connected to systems of power beyond individual control.

The same can be said for many modern migrants crossing the Mediterranean, seeking asylum in Britain, or rebuilding lives after war. Their journeys exist within broader historical structures, some of which were shaped directly by European colonialism and intervention.

This does not mean all immigration policies should be abolished or that states lack the right to regulate borders. Nations require

functioning immigration systems. Social cohesion matters. Economic capacity matters. Public confidence matters.

However, Daaga's legacy suggests that immigration debates become morally hollow when stripped of historical accountability. A nation cannot celebrate imperial achievements while ignoring imperial consequences.

One uncomfortable truth exposed by figures like Daaga is that Western societies often defend mobility selectively.

British citizens moving abroad are typically described as expatriates, investors, or global professionals. Migrants arriving in Britain are more likely to be described in terms of burden, pressure, or crisis.

Historically, British imperial expansion depended entirely on the unrestricted movement of British power, capital, soldiers, and settlers across foreign territories. Colonialism itself was, among other things, a vast migration project.

Daaga's forced displacement was part of this global system. His lack of autonomy illustrates the darker side of mobility controlled entirely by empire.

Contemporary immigration debates rarely acknowledge this asymmetry. Wealthy nations continue to benefit from globalisation while attempting to restrict the movement of poorer populations affected by that same global system.

Critics of immigration often argue that large-scale migration threatens cultural identity and national tradition. This concern should not automatically be dismissed as racism. Rapid demographic change can create genuine social tensions, particularly when governments fail to invest in integration, housing, or infrastructure.

However, history demonstrates that British identity itself has always evolved through contact, migration, and imperial exchange.

The Britain of today, linguistically, culturally, economically, and demographically, was profoundly shaped by empire. Caribbean music, South Asian cuisine, African literature and immigrant labour are not external additions to British life; they are now embedded within it.

Daaga's legacy belongs not only to Trinidadian history but to British history as well, because the empire that transported him was British.

That shared history complicates simplistic notions of who truly "belongs".

There is also a broader educational issue. Historical figures associated with anti-colonial resistance are often sanitised into harmless symbols of courage while the systems they opposed remain insufficiently examined.

Daaga should not merely be remembered as a rebellious slave leader. He should be understood as evidence of how empire functioned through coercion, displacement, and racial control.

When Britain fails to teach imperial history honestly, contemporary immigration debates become detached from historical causation. Citizens are encouraged to view migration as sudden and inexplicable rather than historically interconnected.

This creates fertile ground for populism and resentment.

A more historically literate society would understand that migration between former colonies and imperial centres is not an anomaly. It is, in many ways, a delayed consequence of empire itself.

Daaga's legacy does not provide easy answers. Historical responsibility alone cannot determine modern immigration quotas or asylum policy. Contemporary governments must balance humanitarian obligations with economic realities, national security, and democratic consent.

Yet history should shape moral perspective.

When wealthy former imperial nations discuss immigration without acknowledging colonial history, they risk presenting themselves as innocent bystanders to global inequality. Daaga's story undermines that narrative completely.

His life demonstrates that Britain's relationship with migration began long before modern border debates. The empire moved people forcibly, reorganised societies, extracted labour, and reshaped entire regions. Those historical processes continue to influence global migration patterns today.

Recognising this does not require guilt-driven politics or open borders. It requires honesty.

Daaga's rebellion occurred nearly two centuries ago, yet its themes remain startlingly contemporary. His life speaks to displacement, resistance, identity, exploitation, and the enduring consequences of empire.

In modern Britain, immigration debates are often reduced to slogans about control, sovereignty, or crisis. Daaga's legacy demands a deeper conversation, one grounded in historical memory rather than political convenience.

He reminds us that migration is not simply about borders; it is about power. Who has historically possessed the power to move others? Who benefits from mobility? Who is criminalised for seeking it? And how should nations reckon with histories that helped shape the modern world?

These questions remain unresolved.

That is why Daaga still matters today. ■

fiction

The square at Joseph by Lucas Durand

The rain had stopped an hour before dawn, leaving the cobbles of Joseph Square slick and black beneath the lantern glow. By noon, the city stank of wet horses, smoke, and fear.

Old Jon Kane stood in the shadow of St. Bartholomew's Church with his coat buttoned to the throat and his cane hooked beneath one arm. Seventy-two years old, bones full of old wars and bad winters, and still alive when better men were long in their graves.

He watched the soldiers forming ranks around the square. Too many soldiers. That was the first thing that told him something had gone terribly wrong.

A drummer boy moved through the fog, beating a slow tattoo. Citizens gathered along the edges of the plaza in silence. Women clutched shawls around their necks. Men whispered behind gloved hands. Somewhere nearby a child began crying and was quickly hushed. Above them all hung the giant banner of the Crown.

18 June 1837. The day the Joseph Mutiny would finally show its face. Jon spat into the gutter. “Bloody fools,” he muttered.

“Which side?” asked a voice beside him. Jon glanced sideways. The man standing there wore a dark naval coat and carried himself like military, though no insignia marked him. Mid-forties perhaps. Hard face. Pale eyes. One of those dangerous men who spoke softly because they never needed to shout.

“Depends who’s losing,” Jon replied. The stranger almost smiled. “My name is Captain Gabriel Trent.”

“Didn’t ask.”

“No. But you’ll want to remember it before the day is over.” That earned him a look. Trent leaned closer. “You fought at Salamanca, didn’t you?” Jon stiffened instantly. “How in God’s name...”

“You stand like infantry and watch exits before faces. Men who survive artillery tend to.” Jon said nothing.

Across the square, mounted cavalry appeared through the mist. The crowd shifted uneasily. At their center rode Colonel Matthew Vale, commander of the city garrison. Tall. Silver-haired. Immaculate uniform.

Too immaculate, Jon thought. Men planning murder often polished their boots beforehand. Trumpets sounded. The colonel raised one gloved hand. “Citizens of Joseph!” he called. His voice carried across the square.

“By order of the Crown, several traitors to the realm shall today be exposed and punished!” A murmur rippled through the crowd. Jon noticed Trent studying not the colonel but the rooftops. Interesting. Very interesting.

"You expecting trouble?" Jon asked quietly. Trent answered without looking at him. "It's already started."

Then the first shot cracked across the square. A soldier toppled from horseback with half his throat gone. For one frozen second nobody moved. Then chaos exploded. Gunfire erupted from the rooftops. Women screamed. Horses reared violently. The crowd surged in every direction like floodwater.

"DOWN!" Trent roared. He slammed Jon behind a stone fountain as bullets shattered masonry overhead. Three more shots. Two cavalrymen fell. One horse screamed hideously and collapsed in the mud.

Through smoke and panic, men appeared on the rooftops wearing gray armbands. Mutineers. Real ones. And suddenly Joseph Square became a battlefield. Trent drew a pistol from beneath his coat. Not military issue. Government work.

Jon saw it immediately. "You're intelligence," the old man growled. Trent gave him a quick glance. "Took you long enough." Another volley ripped through the square.

Colonel Vale's soldiers scrambled for cover while officers shouted contradictory orders. Civilians were trampled underfoot. Somewhere nearby glass exploded outward from a shopfront.

Jon watched carefully. And then he saw it. Not panic. Coordination. The mutineers were moving too cleanly. Too professionally. This wasn't rebellion. This was takeover. "Christ Almighty," Jon whispered.

Trent nodded grimly. "Exactly."

"What do they want?"

"The arsenal beneath Parliament Street." Jon looked sharply at him. "There's enough powder there to level half the city."

"Yes." Another shot. Closer this time. A young lieutenant spun backward dead in the mud.

Then suddenly Colonel Vale shouted: "Third regiment with me! Seal the southern streets!"

But nobody moved. Because half the third regiment had already turned their rifles around. The betrayal spread visibly through the square like disease. Soldiers against soldiers. Friends against friends. One corporal bayoneted his own captain.

The crowd shrieked. And in the center of it all, Colonel Vale slowly removed his gloves. "Well," Jon murmured. "There it is."

Captain Trent's jaw tightened. "The bastard." Vale raised his sword high. "FOR JOSEPH!" he thundered.

Mutineers answered from every rooftop and alley. "FOR JOSEPH!" Gunfire erupted again. This time from everywhere. Trent grabbed Jon by the arm. "We move now."

"I'm seventy-two!"

"You can limp later!" They plunged through the chaos together.

Bullets sparked off stone nearby. Smoke rolled through the narrow streets behind the square. Bells began ringing wildly across the city.

Joseph was in open revolt. They cut through an alley littered with overturned carts. Ahead, three armed mutineers appeared through

smoke. “You there!” one shouted. Trent fired instantly. The man collapsed backward.

The other two raised rifles but Jon swung his heavy cane into one man’s knee with a sickening crack. The mutineer screamed. Trent shot the third clean through the chest. For a moment silence returned. Only distant gunfire remained. Jon stared at the dead men. “Been years,” he muttered.

“You still remember.”

“You never forget.” Trent reloaded swiftly. “We need the tunnel entrance beneath Blackfriar Lane.” Jon frowned. “There’s no tunnel beneath Blackfriar.”

“There is if you built the city.” The old man stopped cold. “How do you know about that?” Now Trent looked surprised. “You worked construction?” Jon gave a dry laugh.

“Boy, I helped dig the bloody thing in 1798.” For the first time all day, Trent genuinely smiled. “Well then,” he said. “Looks like God kept you alive for a reason.” They hurried deeper into the city.

Behind them, Joseph burned. By dusk the smoke covered the rooftops entirely. Bodies lay scattered through the streets. Mutineers controlled the bridges. Government troops fought house to house while terrified civilians hid behind barred doors.

And beneath Blackfriar Lane, hidden behind an iron cellar hatch, Jon Kane and Captain Gabriel Trent descended into darkness.

The tunnel smelled of damp earth and gunpowder. Lantern light flickered across old brick walls. “How many mutineers?” Jon asked quietly. “Enough.”

"That's not a number."

"Five hundred inside the city. Maybe more outside."

"Who's leading them?" Trent hesitated. Then: "Colonel Vale was only phase one." Jon stopped walking. "There's someone above him?"

"Yes."

"Who?" Trent's face hardened. "Lord Pembroke." Jon felt cold suddenly. Not from the tunnel. From memory. Pembroke was nobility. Wealthy. Connected to Parliament. Untouchable.

Unless he won. Then none of it mattered anymore. At the far end of the tunnel came voices. Armed men. Trent extinguished the lantern immediately. Darkness swallowed them whole. The voices grew louder. "…powder arrives before midnight…"

"…Vale controls the square…"

"…Pembroke says no survivors…"

Jon slowly tightened his grip on the cane. Trent leaned near his ear. "Three men."

"I heard."

"You still fight?" The old man smiled in the darkness. It looked like something from an old graveyard. "Son," he whispered, "I fought the French drunk."

Then they moved. Fast. Brutal. Silent. Trent killed the first with a knife under the ribs. Jon smashed the second across the jaw with the iron head of his cane.

The third reached for a pistol... Too late. Trent broke his neck cleanly. The tunnel fell silent again. Jon breathed heavily now. Age catching up. Trent studied him. "You all right?"

"No," Jon said honestly. "But I'm still standing." They reached the arsenal chamber just before midnight. And found Lord Pembroke waiting. Tall. Elegant. Calm as death itself.

Behind him stood two dozen armed mutineers beside stacked powder barrels. Pembroke smiled faintly. "Captain Trent," he said. "I wondered when they'd send you."

"You lose tonight," Trent replied. Pembroke shook his head. "No. England loses tonight." Then all hell broke loose.

Gunfire deafened the chamber. Powder smoke filled the air instantly. Men screamed. Trent fired twice, dropping two mutineers. Jon swung the cane like a club, smashing teeth and bone.

One rebel lunged with a bayonet... Jon sidestepped and drove the cane into the man's throat.

But more came. Too many. Trent was hit in the shoulder and slammed against a barrel. Pembroke calmly lit a fuse. "History," he said softly, "requires sacrifice." The burning fuse hissed toward the powder train. Jon saw it. Saw everything. And moved.

Old legs. Old pain. Old war. But fast enough.

He hurled himself across the chamber as bullets tore past him. Trent shouted something distant. The fuse burned closer. Closer...

Jon grabbed it barehanded. Fire bit into flesh. The old man roared through clenched teeth and ripped the fuse free. Then Trent shot Pembroke directly between the eyes. Silence. Sudden and complete.

The mutiny died there beneath Joseph. Not with speeches. Not with glory. But in smoke, blood, and darkness.

Hours later dawn crept across the ruined city. Soldiers marched surviving mutineers through the streets in chains. Church bells rang again. This time for the dead.

Jon sat on the cathedral steps with bandaged hands while Captain Trent lit two cigarettes and handed him one. The old man took it. "You intelligence boys always this troublesome?"

"Usually worse." They smoked in silence for a while. Finally Jon asked: "What happens now?"

Trent looked over the battered city. "Now they bury the truth." Jon nodded slowly. Because he knew that was how nations survived. Not on heroics. On secrets. Trent stood and adjusted his coat. "You saved a great many lives yesterday."

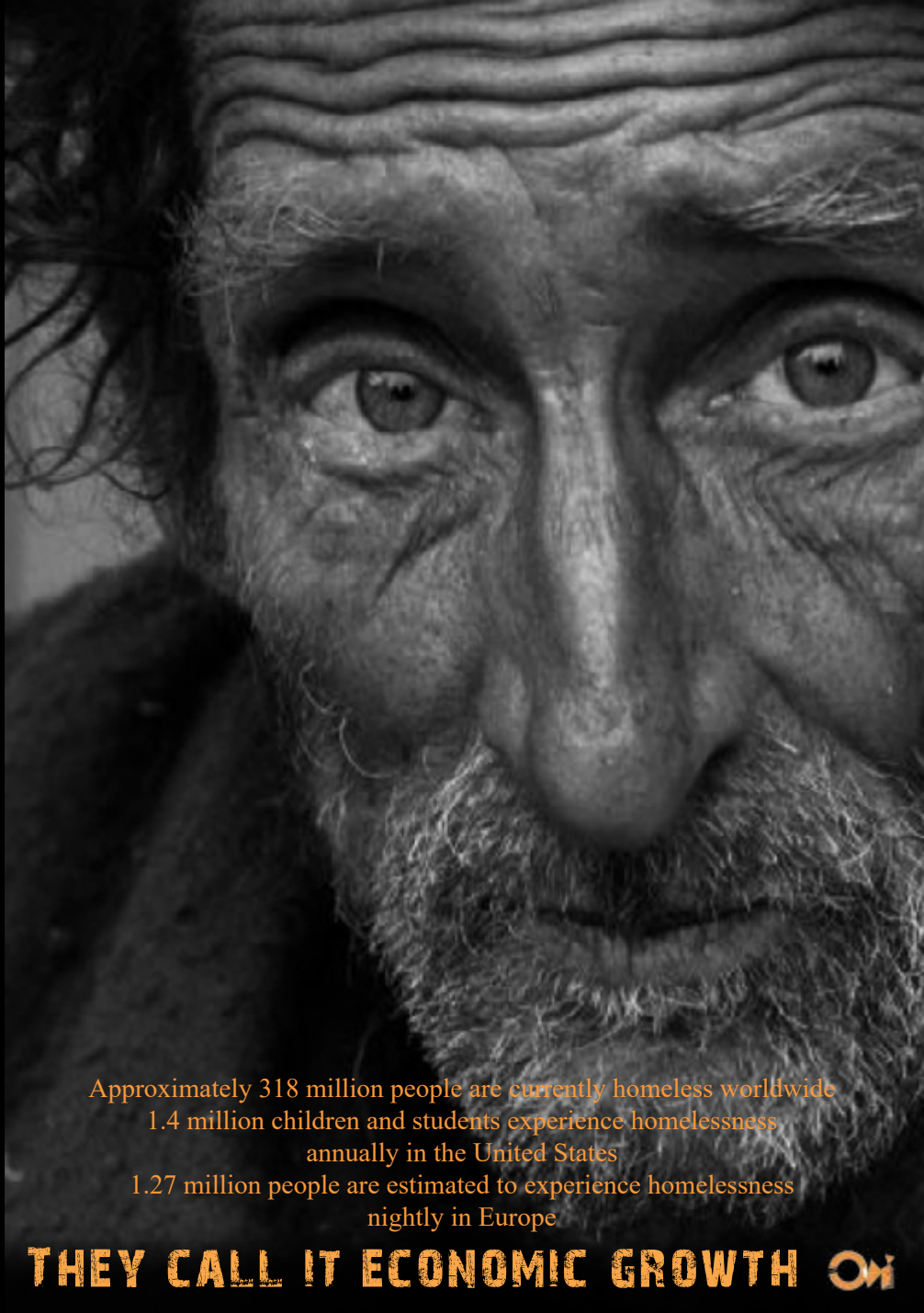
Jon grunted. "No one will remember."

Captain Gabriel Trent smiled faintly. "They never do."

Then he disappeared into the morning fog while the old man remained on the cathedral steps, watching the city of Joseph awaken after one long terrible night.

And somewhere beneath the streets, the last smoke of the mutiny still drifted through the dark. ■

The End



Approximately 318 million people are currently homeless worldwide
1.4 million children and students experience homelessness annually in the United States
1.27 million people are estimated to experience homelessness nightly in Europe

THEY CALL IT ECONOMIC GROWTH

reviews

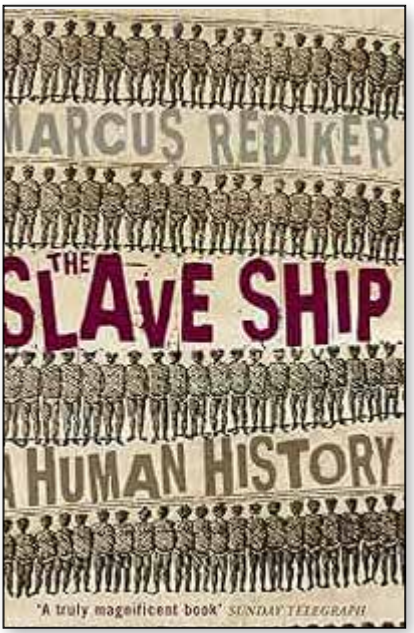
Between water and bone
The slave ship as the true cradle of capitalism

Review of Marcus Rediker,
***The Slave Ship: A Human History* (Viking, 2007)**

In the vast historiography of the Atlantic slave trade, the slave ship has often served as a mere silhouette, a grim prop in the background of more comfortable narratives about abolition, industrialisation, or African diaspora culture. It is a vessel, we are told, that carried bodies from point A to point B. Marcus Rediker's masterful *The Slave Ship: A Human History* shatters this passive image. With the rigor of a maritime archaeologist and the moral urgency of a witness, Rediker places the ship at the very centre of modern history, not merely as a transporter of goods, but as a machine, a laboratory, and a floating dystopia that forged the racial and economic order of the capitalist world.

Rediker, a distinguished historian of Atlantic labour and piracy, has spent decades studying the "motley crew" of the maritime proletariat. Here, he turns his lens on the most brutal workplace of the eighteenth century. His argument is deceptively simple yet devastating, the slave ship was the first

modern factory. Long before the smokestacks of Manchester, the ship's hold was a site of disciplined, round-the-clock production, not of textiles or steel, but of human commodities. The "middle passage" was not a journey; it was a process of "seasoning", terror, and violent abstraction, turning African men, women, and children into cargo.



The book is a model of multi-perspectival history. Rediker organises the narrative around four archetypal figures, each given a chapter of penetrating social and psychological analysis: the African captive, the sailor, the captain (or "guinea captain"), and the abolitionist. This structure allows Rediker to avoid the trap of monolithic victimhood. We see the ship from below deck, where captives forged bonds of solidarity and staged desperate rebellions; from the rigging, where common seamen, often press-ganged, brutalised, and paid in poisonous rum, lived in filth and died of "the bloody flux"; and from the quarterdeck, where captains like John Newton (later the hymnodist) calculated rates of mortality against rates of profit with cold, actuarial logic.

One of the book's most original contributions is its redefinition of terror as a technology. Rediker argues that the brutality onboard, the thumbscrews, the *speculum oris* (a mouth-opening device used for force-feeding), the arbitrary floggings and the sexual violence, was not mere sadism or a loss of control. It was a deliberate, rational system of management. Terror was the lubricant of the trade. It broke

the will of the rebellious, silenced the suicidal, and transformed free human beings into tradable property. Rediker quotes one slave-ship surgeon who chillingly explained that the goal was to make captives "docile". In this sense, the slave ship was a psychological laboratory for the kind of biopolitical control that would later define plantation slavery and, eventually, industrial discipline.

The book also succeeds brilliantly as a spatial history. Rediker reads the ship's architecture as a text. The "loose pack" versus "tight pack" debate (whether to pack captives tightly for volume or loosely for survival) is shown to be a grim actuarial calculus. But more importantly, Rediker shows how the ship's internal geography, the barricado (a fortified partition near the stern), the hold, the main deck, the captain's cabin, structured every human interaction. The barricado, for instance, kept armed sailors separate from captives but also became the site of negotiation and rebellion. The hold was a womb of death and also a space of whispered conspiracies. This is history from the planks up.

Yet *The Slave Ship* is not without its conceptual tensions. Rediker, a committed Marxist and democratic socialist, sometimes strains to harmonise his class analysis with his evident horror at racial violence. He argues persuasively that the slave ship was a crucible of "racist ideology"—that whiteness was invented on these decks as a badge of discipline and supremacy. But his frequent return to the multi-ethnic solidarity of the common sailors (who, he notes, sometimes jumped overboard to escape their own misery) feels slightly romanticised. The historical record shows many sailors eagerly participating in the torture of captives; class interest did not always override racial terror. Rediker knows this, but his political hope for a unified proletariat occasionally softens the sharper edges of his own evidence.

Moreover, the final chapter, on the abolitionist campaign and the

famous image of the *Brookes* slave ship diagram, is brilliant but hurried. Rediker shows how abolitionists "reversed the gaze", turning the ship from a tool of profit into an icon of moral outrage. Yet one wishes for more on the afterlife of the ship: how did the architectural and psychological patterns of the slave ship survive in Jim Crow railroads, chain gangs, or even the shipping containers of globalised capital? The book ends in 1808 (the abolition of the British trade), but its implications scream into our own century.

Stylistically, Rediker is a master. The prose is muscular, vivid, and unflinching without being pornographic. He describes a captive's suicide by drowning as "a flight of freedom through water". He captures the stench, vomit, faeces, blood and "the savour of death" with novelistic precision. And he has a sharp ear for the cynical poetry of the traders themselves. One captain calls his cargo "black ivory". Another notes that a rebellious captive "gave us a good deal of trouble in dying".

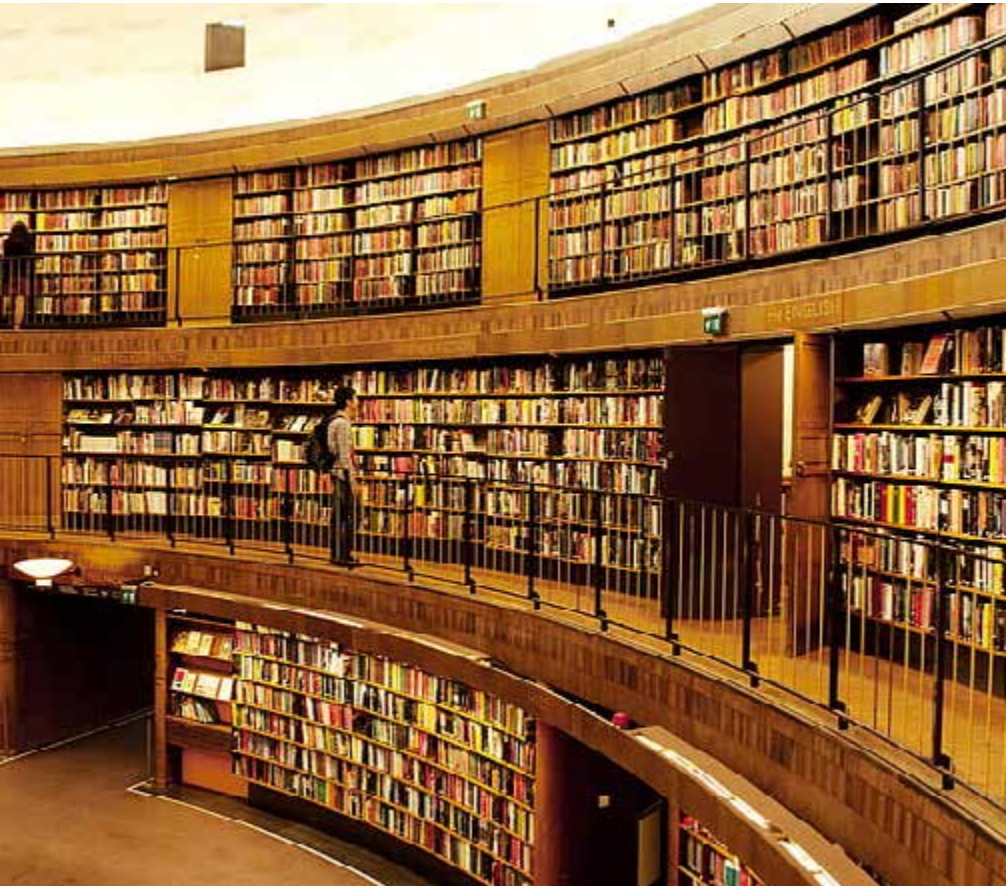
What makes *The Slave Ship* an essential, not just an excellent, work of history is its refusal to compartmentalise. It refuses to let the middle passage remain a "tragic footnote" to the Enlightenment. It reminds us that the same century that produced Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and Jefferson's Declaration of Independence also produced the floating concentration camps of the Atlantic. Rediker does not offer redemption; he offers witness. And in doing so, he challenges us to recognise that the slave ship is not an aberration in the history of capitalism. It is its original, most efficient, and most honest form.

In the end, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* is not a book about the past. It is a book about *us,* about the submerged violence that still buoys the modern world. Read it, but be prepared to feel the roll of that deck beneath your feet. And the chains around your conscience. ■

OF THE PEOPLE

A DEMOCRACY DIES NOT IN THE DARK, BUT IN THE BRIGHT GLARE OF APATHY.

June in history



June 4, 1989
Tiananmen Square Massacre

Student-led pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China, turned deadly after Chinese government troops suppressed the demonstrations with violence. Estimates vary from several hundred to several thousand people being killed. ■

June 15, 1215
Magna Carta signed

Hoping to avoid further revolt and civil war in England, King John met with a band of 25 rebel barons in Runnymede, Surrey, and signed the Magna Carta (Latin for great charter). It was the first document to state in principle that the king and his government were not above the law. ■

June 22, 1941
Operation Barbarossa is launched

Arguably one of the worst military decisions in the history of warfare was launched on this day in 1941. Hitler's ill-fated invasion of Russia led to the deaths of millions of soldiers and civilians as the Eastern Front became a meat-grinder during WWII. ■

June 6, 1944
D-Day

The Normandy Landings of 6 June 1944, codenamed Operation Overlord, remain the largest seaborne invasion in history and a pivotal turning point in the Second World War. In the predawn hours, over 156,000 Allied troops—predominantly American, British, Canadian, and Free French—crossed the tempestuous English Channel from the south coast of England. While the Americans faced the brutal, blood-soaked chaos of Omaha and Utah beaches, British and Canadian forces landed at Gold, Juno, and Sword, with the iconic 6th Airborne Division securing the vital Pegasus Bridge hours before the naval bombardment began. Despite relentless German machine-gun fire, artillery, and the deadly maze of Rommel's "Atlantic Wall" obstacles, the Allies established a crucial foothold on Hitler's Fortress Europe, albeit at a staggering human cost of nearly 4,500 confirmed deaths.

The strategic triumph of D-Day was not merely a military victory, but a profound logistical and intelligence masterpiece. Ingenious deceptions, such as Operation Fortitude, successfully fooled the German High Command into believing the main invasion would strike at Calais, leaving the Normandy defenders critically undermanned. Once the beaches were secured, the Allies rapidly deployed prefabricated Mulberry harbours to funnel thousands of tanks, vehicles, and supplies ashore, ensuring a relentless advance into the French countryside. This audacious assault shattered the myth of German invincibility, forced a catastrophic two-front war upon the Reich, and ultimately paved the way for the liberation of Western Europe. For the British public, it was the long-awaited beginning of the end—a day of immense national relief, unity, and the solemn recognition of the supreme sacrifice made by "the few" who stormed the sands for the freedom of generations to come. ■

Ovi History
Issue 20 - June 2026
St. Joseph Mutiny

Ovi Thematic/History eMagazines
Publications 2026

Design: Thanos

An Ovi eBooks Publication
© 2026 Ovi eBookPublications - All material is copyright of the Ovi eBooks Publications & the writer

Ovi Thematic/History Magazines are available in
Ovi/Ovi ThematicMagazines and OviPedia pages
in all forms PDF/ePub/mobi, and they are always FREE.
If somebody tries to sell you an Ovi Thematic or Ovi History Magazine
please contact us immediately.

For details, contact: ovimagazine@yahoo.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced
into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means
(electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise),
without the prior permission of the writers or the above publisher of this magazine.

History isn't just dates, it's our shared roadmap of triumph, failure, and resilience. Understand the past and you'll see tomorrow more clearly

Ovi History

Download our eBooks for FREE, **HERE!**